

## BECOMING LIKE A CHILD

### Introduction

A profound statement is made by Jesus nestled in his teaching on the Kingdom of God. “And he said, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’” (Mat 18:3). This statement is at the center of the corpus of Jesus’ kingdom teaching and the teaching centers upon it. I say that it is *at the center of his teaching* because it appears in the context of the apex of Jesus’ ministry. D. A. Carson explains the “at that time” of verse 1 is literally “at that hour”. He writes, “It alerts the reader to the transition from what precedes...When Jesus has again spoken of his suffering and death, the disciples’ grief (17:23) proves short lived; and they busy themselves with arguing about who is greatest in the kingdom.”<sup>1</sup> This is the change point of Jesus’ earthly tour. It is at about this time, having identified himself to his disciples as Messiah, he begins to move toward the culmination in Jerusalem. I say that his *teaching centers upon this statement* because this radical idea that embraces the most exploited group of society serves as a fulcrum for the entire kingdom mentality. Matthew has a follow up verse that must be taken in stride: for it mirrors the thought. “Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these’” (Mat 19:14). As shall be shown, Matthew may have intended these two verses to border a teaching segment on this all important topic of children and the kingdom.

The social norms of ancient Judaism were not too different from the expectations of many cultures at various times and junctures of world history. According to R. T. France children were “the lowest in the hierarchy of authority and decision making.”<sup>2</sup> He says Jesus was not zeroing in on

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<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 396.

<sup>2</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 677.

the qualities of a child so much as simply being able to accept the lack of status. Children were to be seen and not heard. Yet there is no kids' table at Jesus' banquet. This child is not only admitted but esteemed. Sadly, in church history children have been marginalized. In the ascetic movement in particular, young adults were encouraged not to have children at all, parents abandoned their children for lengthy periods to pursue "religious perfection, and mothers in particular were praised for being able to give up their worldly attachments for the sake of Christian martyrdom."<sup>3</sup> Some of that sentiment, though not in radical extremism, has informed children in church life in the United States. In her research on the roles of children's involvement in worship services at typical American churches, Sally K. Gallagher bemoans "few opportunities present themselves to connect mature faith to the innocence of childhood."<sup>4</sup> And again she observes, "Children appear less as metaphors of faith, and more as recipients of adult nurture, teaching, discipline, and care."<sup>5</sup> But that is changing. She is able to celebrate "the ways in which children contribute to the formation of religious and cultural identity among adults."<sup>6</sup>

There are differences in opinion as to what childhood was like in the time of Jesus. On the one hand a morbid picture is painted that is hardly tenable with more optimistic views. Jerry Camery-Hoggat believes that it was an accomplishment to survive birth. If you were one of the fortunate ones who made it through the high infant mortality rate you would reach another hurdle at the end of the toddler stage. He says, "We think of children as innocent, carefree, laughing. In the ancient world it meant to be powerless, without clout, no politicking."<sup>7</sup> He reports the morality rate of the ancient world was 30% before age 6 and another 30% before age 20. Jesus was not viewed as

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<sup>3</sup> John Wall, review *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, O. M. Bakke, *Interpretation* 60 no 3 July (2006): 338-40.

<sup>4</sup> Sally K. Gallagher, "Children as Religious Resources: The Role of Children in the Social Re-Formation of Class, Culture, and Religious Identity" *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion* 46:2 June 2007: 176.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, Gallagher, 177.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, Gallagher, 170.

<sup>7</sup> Class notes, New Testament 1: Gospels, MDiv, Fuller Theological Seminary Southwest, Phoenix, Arizona, January 2007.

a young man at age 30, but a wise sage. Paulette Taylor-Wingender also feels empathy for the plight of children. “The child was by the very fact of his/her childlikeness in a position of helplessness and vulnerability in the first century far more so than in our day.”<sup>8</sup> Reidar Aasgaard says, “As a result of the general living conditions, a great number of infants died, and the status of a newborn was very low.”<sup>9</sup> He states further,

In antiquity, children were viewed as immature: they were physical in character, bodily weak, emotionally unstable, and intellectually deficient and were thus unable to reach the standard of the ideal human being, which was the fully grown (male) adult. Although people had an understanding of childhood as a life stage with its own characteristics and value, children were nevertheless perceived to be unfinished: they were humans-to-be.<sup>10</sup>

But there are just as many voices saying children were generally healthier in Bible times than medieval times. And even though there may have been no dentists, in general the diet was healthier. Gums may have induced disease but teeth were generally healthy.<sup>11</sup> Yet, most all agree children were disadvantaged in terms of the social pecking order.

In this paper I examine the implications of *actual children*, and how this teaching should affect the Church’s treatment of its “little ones”. It is my assertion that children are predisposed to value and demonstrate God’s kingdom. As Donald A. Hagner has written, “Little children indeed intrinsically have an affinity for the kingdom.”<sup>12</sup> France speaking of “literal children” says flatly, “Children matter in the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>13</sup> So the first task of this paper seeks to mine out what it is in children intrinsically that Jesus knows to be so valuable as to demonstrate the kingdom. Then I will peruse the implications upon *spiritual children*. That is, what does this teaching imply for all

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<sup>8</sup> Paulette Taylor-Wingender, “Kids of the Kingdom (A Study of Matthew 18:1-5, and Its Context)” *Direction* 17:2 Fall 1988: 21.

<sup>9</sup> Reidar Aasgaard, “Paul as a Child: Children and Childhood in the Letters of the Apostle” *Journal of Biblical Literature* no 1 Spring 2007: 141.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, Aasgaard, 144.

<sup>11</sup> So Tom Parker, director, Blaine Charette PhD, and Ed Nelson PhD, Class notes, Hebrew Prophets; New Testament 2: Acts – Revelation; and Jesus and the Kingdom, MDiv, Fuller Theological Seminary, Phoenix, Arizona, February, 2008, October 2006, and September 2008, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> Donald H. Hagner, *Matthew*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 553.

<sup>13</sup> France, *NICNT*, 727.

God's children, adolescents and adults? It may be stating the obvious: Jesus intends his grown followers to grow internally.

### **The Literal Implications for Actual Children**

The disciples initiated the conversation with the question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" It is really a strange question to be asked. Even when we are given the context, and understand the prompt had been the tax exempt status of the heir and his brothers, it remains an alien enquiry. Carson calls it "the carnality of the opening question [that] establishes a radical set of values for greatness in the kingdom."<sup>14</sup> In the sweep of the gospels we find the disciples' misgivings manifest particularly with relation to entitlements. This account may be chalked up to another episode of their jockeying for position. France observes, "In effect the question means 'Who is the top disciple?'"<sup>15</sup> It is not so much diplomatic immunity they seek. Rather they want status in Jesus' kingdom. Since Jesus had announced he would die, they are rallying to the cause. Who will be his replacement? Hagner says, "The disciples are apparently not so much interested in the reasons for greatness as in the state itself of being 'greatest'."<sup>16</sup> They had not understood the kind of kingdom he had in mind. And this escapade is less than glamorous.

Jesus, however, is interested in the reasons and seems to have a target in mind. It is the ideal opportunity for him to choose carefully. The disciples have set up the teaching moment beautifully. Jesus does not choose an infant. He kisses no babies here, as in a political campaign. He intentionally selects a boy old enough to reason, but young enough to be viewed as impressionable. The tender shoot before Jesus is not immersed in the heady ways of materialism. He is not tainted by gross self-centeredness. For that matter, he is not engulfed in distorted allegiance to national

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<sup>14</sup> Carson, *Expositor's*, 398.

<sup>15</sup> France, *NICNT*, 675.

<sup>16</sup> Hagner, *Word*, 517.

identity. Though these implications are definitely underway in this child's life, Jesus chooses the closest to a factory default he can find – one that can communicate, appreciate, value, and assess.

### **The Child as a Whole Person First of All**

Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook has observed, “Children are not innocent ‘blank slates’ without capacity for authentic spiritual experience, moral awareness, or decision making. Rather, children are full persons, with valuable gifts and capable of moral agency.”<sup>17</sup> What age is the child Jesus models? We are not told in the text. France comments, “We are given no indication of the identity of the child, and that is as it should be: the child's very anonymity helps to make the point.”<sup>18</sup> However, Taylor-Wingender<sup>19</sup> comments that the term was used either for infants or older children. This boy was able to stand in front of the group.<sup>20</sup> He must have been somewhere between toddler age and older child. Since this is not an infant he may be presumed therefore, according to Taylor-Wingender, to be an older child, perhaps 8 to 12 years old. The Jewish tradition recognized a boy to be fully man at his thirteenth birthday. His bar mitzvah gave him full adult privilege. She says the irony is that until becoming a teenager Judaism held children outside the covenant; but Jesus taught that children, up to age twelve, already owned the entire kingdom. Kujawa-Holbrook says, “Reflection on daily life is a central task of theology, and expounds the belief that genuine liberation occurs in the most common, marginalized places, namely, the embodied lives of children.”<sup>21</sup> Eric Stephanson captures the spirit of the moment. “Are we human beings on a spiritual journey or spiritual beings on a human journey?” He concludes both are true; but then observes, “Life is

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<sup>17</sup> Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, review of *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*, Bonnie J. Miller, *Anglican Theological Review* 18:88 (2006) 134-7.

<sup>18</sup> France, NICNT, 677.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor-Wingender, “Kids of the Kingdom”: 21.

<sup>20</sup> Though some translations have “brought before” rather than “stand before”, e.g. – Donald A. Hagner's translation of the verse.

<sup>21</sup> Kujawa-Holbrook, *Let the Children Come*.

permeated with wonder and the paradox of spiritual truth comes more readily perhaps through children than sometimes world-weary adults.”<sup>22</sup>

On two occasions in the first letter to the Thessalonians there are discrepancies considered by textual critics in which, Paul, the apostle, may be referring to himself as the child and the recipients as the parents. 1 Thessalonians 2:7 may be interpreted “We were babies among you.” And a few verses later Paul very well could have described his separation from them as “being orphaned” (1 Thess 2:17). Aasgaard, the Norwegian theologian from the University of Oslo asks, “Does Paul see himself as a nurse and the Thessalonians as his small children? Or does he put himself as a baby in their motherly arms?”<sup>23</sup> He answers his own question: “Paul presents himself not as a father longing for his children but as an orphan yearning—hopelessly—for its parents. What is conveyed through the metaphor in terms of power is not parental care or authority but the helplessness and marginalization of an orphaned child.”<sup>24</sup>

Apparently the early church took the words of Jesus to heart in a literal way. Consider the comment by O.M. Bakke, “Early Christian children played more significant roles in worship than previously realized, particularly through singing in choirs and in response to the liturgy, reading scriptural texts, and participating in the Eucharist.”<sup>25</sup> He points out there was a generally “positive regard for children’s moral and spiritual capabilities.”

## Positional Standing of Children Historically

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<sup>22</sup> Eric Stephanson, review of *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, Tobin Hart, *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, 9 no 3 D (2004) 325-7.

<sup>23</sup> Aasgaard, “Paul as a Child”: 147.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, Aasgaard, “Paul as a Child”: 143.

<sup>25</sup> John Wall, *When Children Became People*.

Bakke has observed the tension that filled the early church over the spiritual condition of children. The church fathers debated quite extensively on the subject.

It appears that early church fathers such as Clement, Origen, and Tertullian exempted early childhood from sinfulness as primarily a time of “innocence,” including simplicity, sexual purity, lack of desire, and indifference toward status and wealth. Cyprian and Gregory depict infants as coming into the world as complete human beings, fresh creations of God, and hence without sin. Chrysostom argues that as images of God, children may easily be formed by their parents as an artist forms a sculpture. All of this changes, however, with Augustine. Augustine famously insists in his *Confessions* and other writings that children enter the world lacking innocence because they are already bound up in Adam's original sin.<sup>26</sup>

Tobin Hart points out that the traditional approaches in religious education revolve around attempts to teach from the outside in. But in his research he discovered that “children have spiritual lives from the inside out.”<sup>27</sup> Stephanson puts it another way, “There is a spiritual reality within which our physical, intellectual and emotional selves live.”<sup>28</sup> In commenting on Jesus’ words “Unless you receive the Kingdom of God as a child, you cannot enter it” he writes,

The truth of our spiritual lives is not entered by the traditional means of making progress in other parts of life. Personal accomplishment, strategic planning and bold self-assertion are in fact contrary to the patterns leading to spiritual insight, which involve a humble openness, an acceptance of vulnerability and a willingness to be led through your comfort zone, beyond where you are ‘in control’. The natural state of being a child is wonderfully reflective of these elements of spiritual journeying most adults wish they could recapture.<sup>29</sup>

Aasgaard agrees. “In antiquity...childhood was thought to have qualities that other stages of life lacked. Children were innocent and pure... they were perceived to have special contact with the ‘other world’ and could on occasion mediate divine messages, for example, as oracles.”<sup>30</sup> Stanley Grenz has observed that in the Bible “normal development includes a transition from innocency to responsibility and hence to potential judgment. Somewhere in childhood we move from a stage in which our actions are not deemed morally accountable to the responsibility of acting as moral

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> Stephanson, *The Secret Spiritual World*.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

<sup>30</sup> Aasgaard, “Paul as a Child”: 149.

agents.”<sup>31</sup> Millard Erickson also acknowledges this point. “There are several indications in Scripture that persons are not morally responsible before a certain point, which we sometimes call ‘the age of accountability.’”<sup>32</sup> In support of this view he cites Deuteronomy 1:39 in which Moses states the children do not yet know wrong from right, and Isaiah 7, the messianic prophecy which speaks of the boy being old enough to reject the wrong and choose the right.

The apostle Paul who, at times, uses childhood as a metaphor for immature faith (1 Cor 3:2; 13:11) also speaks in positive ways about childhood. “Paul—in keeping with general views—seems to idealize children proper as innocent, as untouched by the world (Phil 2:15)...he appears to assess children’s intellectual capability positively, maybe even more so than many of his contemporaries (1 Cor 13:11).”<sup>33</sup> As to the spiritual status of a child Aasgaard observes, “In light of [1 Cor 7] v. 14b, [it seems likely that Paul] views the holiness of children as depending on two elements: that the parents are married and that at least one of them is a believer.”<sup>34</sup>

### **The Particular Dilemma of Reformed Theology and What to Do with Children**

At the close of the nineteenth century the question of infant salvation was resolved by common consensus to mean all infants who die go to heaven. Though not all accepted this and some wished to leave it to the unrevealed counsel of God. In the Reformed tradition, there was a significant strand in the vein of Herman Hoeksema and Abraham Kuyper, who viewed all covenant children as saved because “God does not promise or offer anything to persons he does not intend to redeem.”<sup>35</sup> But the “actual majority view” of the Reformed movement followed the train of teachers like “Klaas Schilder [who] led a theological charge against some key aspects of the covenant

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<sup>31</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 209.

<sup>32</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 654.

<sup>33</sup> Aasgaard, “Paul as a Child”: 157.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, Aasgaard, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Richard J. Mouw, “Baptism and the Salvific Status of Children: An Examination of Some Intra-Reformed Debates” *Calvin Theological Journal* 41 no 2 N 2006: 250.

theology.”<sup>36</sup> He believed the covenant of salvation was not unilateral (God working only) but bilateral (involving the participation of humanity); and not unconditional but actually conditioned upon the response of the individual. And the real difference came down to the difference between “election and covenant.”<sup>37</sup> What is at stake here is precisely this: Does God see children as under an umbrella of grace? Or do they have to do something first before he accepts them? There is a sense in which it is inextricably tied into this verse of text, Matthew 18:3. “A Christian ethic of children ‘asserts that one’s own good is inextricably linked to the common good, the good of others, the good of the whole. . . . The good lies in *the reign of God* and the love of neighbor”<sup>38</sup> (emphasis mine). As Richard Mouw observes, “In the final analysis, it comes down to a simple matter of exegesis turning upon the point whether the Savior’s declaration, ‘Of such is the kingdom of God,’ means, ‘Of *all* such,’ or, ‘Of *some* such.’”<sup>39</sup> This belief has bearing on the teaching of Jesus. Just what was implied by his statement that he wants his adherents to change and become like children. Either Calvinism is true or it isn’t. If it is true then, plain and simple, God unilaterally relegates humans to hell. If one believes this, then logically, this includes that he also relegates infants to hell. There is no way around this. One may dance around the issue as Schilder attempted; try to create a mysterious “third class”<sup>40</sup> between redeemed and reprobate as Hoeksema; or simply change views to Armenianism (something Mouw is not recommending in any respect). The issue is precisely this. Jesus gave special exalted status to all children as the owners of the kingdom. It belongs to them. And he told the adult audience they must change and become like children or they will be denied admittance. We now to turn to this “change” point. What are its implications?

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid: Mouw, “Baptism”: 248.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, Mouw, “Baptism”: 246.

<sup>38</sup> Kujawa-Holbrook, *Let the Children Come*.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, Mouw, “Baptism”: 240.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, Mouw, “Baptism”: 252.

### **The Figurative Implications for Spiritual Children**

There is more to Jesus' object lesson than physical attributes (though there are valuable lessons to be learned by not rushing too quickly to the overt). It was obvious to everyone in the audience that he was attempting to drive home an important kingdom principle. What is the point Jesus wants his adult listeners to hear? It will be shown Jesus followed this living object lesson with teaching grounded in the concept of a kingdom-value ethic placing both worth on children and necessity upon replicating their qualities.

### **The Un-children**

There is incredible irony in the fact that the first children never were. Contrast the ideal kingdom inhabitants – children – against the first inhabitants of paradise – adults. It is informative that Adam and Eve, the first children, were not children at all. Yet Jesus wants us to become like little children as the ideal model of kingdom-living. Not too much should be made of this. Obviously God knew they had to be adults in order to survive. Yet, it is not beyond the realm of reason that God could have made infants that he himself reared, or even slightly older children that he raised. Children were planned, evidently, from the beginning. It was not as if child-bearing was never intended. But after sin entered the world child-bearing became very painful for women. And conversely work becomes toilsome for men. What is lost in the development in a sinful world context? What will the kingdom be like with childlike leadership?

Whatever differences there are between Adam and Eve and the child Jesus alludes to in Matthew 18, there are, nonetheless, remarkable similarities as well. For one, Adam and Eve had not been tarnished by preconceived ideas and ideals. Moreover, though the child in audience of Jesus was somewhat disadvantaged having received subtle indoctrination by his environment there was an air of innocence. Equally, the prototypes Adam and Eve were environed by a stealthy snake, but were nonetheless in an untainted paradise. I suggest this plays into the mysterious chaos that existed

prehistorically. Genesis 1:2 causes much scratching of the head for theologians. Where did the evil come from? In some mysterious way God required humanity. And this humanity must be “born again” or “born from above” (John 3:16). One cannot be born again without first being born period. One cannot be born from above without first being born from below.

### **A Child-bounded Teaching Block?**

As an example of being “born again/from above” Jesus immediately delves into teaching segments that place on exhibit the maturity of childlikeness. Paulette Taylor-Wingender believes the two mentions of children and the kingdom of God by Matthew serve as the bookends of a block of teaching. On her view, this section is bounded by Matthew 18:1 and Matthew 19:15. Both the beginning and the ending of the section have to do with childlikeness and the kingdom.

And between these two stand five units that are parallel in form. Each one portrays a responsible party and a vulnerable party. Each of the vulnerable parties is presented as valuable and worth restoring and protecting. Each of the responsible parties is called to humility and diligence in restoring those who might not seem worth saving, but on whom Jesus places special value.<sup>41</sup>

If she is correct this would mirror, in miniature, the five discourses of Jesus in Matthew that convey the symbolism of Torah – a commonly held view among consensus scholarship.

The five discourses of Jesus in Matthew have been variously described. One picturesque description has the gospel as a river with five locations in which the water pools up. These five miniature teachings on kingdom that Taylor-Wingender recognizes, sandwiched between the two book-end statements on children, may be thought of more accurately as five small cascades overflowing two of the large pools. And one must heed France’s warning, “I am generally skeptical of those who claim to find symmetrical patterns in biblical books where they have not been perceived by ordinary readers.”<sup>42</sup> Carson seems to be correct in his having Jesus’ fourth discourse end at 19:2.

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<sup>41</sup> Taylor-Wingender, “Kids of the Kingdom”: 19.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, review of *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher*, R. T. France *Presbyterian* 18 no 2 Fall (1992): 134.

There is a clear break with the words, “When Jesus finished saying these things” (19:1). Still, Matthew may have intoned these five teachings intentionally. I find sympathy with Wingender’s thesis because not only are the teaching segments bracketed by “children and the kingdom of heaven” statements, but they also follow a progression in thought. They are an echo of Torah within the greater reverberation of Torah that has been accepted readily in the book of Matthew. Donald A. Hagner observes, “Matthew, here, as throughout the discourse, makes use of different sources, piecing them together in a fresh and stimulating manner, mainly with an eye to the catechetical value of the whole.”<sup>43</sup> This may explain the progression we see in thought.

It is informative that Jesus uses the model of a child, but is not really speaking about children per se. He is imaging qualities for his followers to emulate. One is hard pressed to find exegesis of this text. In fact, as David E. Orton puts it, “the ‘little ones’ have been largely overlooked in NT research.”<sup>44</sup> So who are the little ones? “The ‘little ones’ are evidently the newer recruits, the undergraduate disciples of the gospel who join with prophets and mature scribes in the mission to make more disciples.”<sup>45</sup> Carson observes, “The one who welcomes ‘a little child like this *in my name*’ is not welcoming literal children but ‘children’ defined in the previous verses – those who humble themselves to become like little children, i.e., Jesus’ true disciples.”<sup>46</sup> Orton holds to the view that the child of Matthew 18:3 symbolizes the rejected, the underdogs, those unexpected to attain it. “These ‘ideal’ disciples are the child-like believers (some of them even tax-collectors, cf. 21:31) who enter into the kingdom of heaven and through their humble discipleship become the greatest in it

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<sup>43</sup> Hagner, *Word*, 516.

<sup>44</sup> David E. Orton, “We Felt Like Grasshoppers: The Little Ones in Biblical Interpretation” *Interpretation* 11 no 3-4 2003: 501.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*

<sup>46</sup> Carson, *Expositor’s*, 398.

(18:4, 5), for of ‘such’ is the kingdom of heaven (19:14; cf. 13:52).”<sup>47</sup> Now Jesus proceeds to teach his followers how humble a true disciple is to be.

In the five teachings Jesus moves from the outward to the inward, and at the same time goes from narrow to broad and back to narrow again. He starts with loneliness and moves to the most respected of soliloquies. In the first place is the parable of the one lost sheep, Matthew 18:10-14. He is outside the establishment.<sup>48</sup> While Club 99 is partying, God’s heart is looking for the one who is outside and lost. To be certain the one is not the only one. There are many lost sheep, many more than the 99 on the inside. But the clear point of Jesus is to picture this one in isolation. He or she may be surrounded by many in the worldly crowd but still be lost and alone. In the second instance, Matthew 18:15-20, the large group of insiders is addressed. So it moves from one to many, narrow to broad instantly. Hagner believes this passage plays into “the cause of others’ falling.”<sup>49</sup> The newly welcomed disciple should have the guarantee of a large group that operates in tranquility. Its differences are meted out in fairness and are reasonable. So be congenial to one another, goes the line of thought, and in extreme cases in which the team spirit is not adhered to there is recourse.

At the third cascade, Matthew 18:21-35, we move away from the large group to close knit small-groups. Within your circle of acquaintances, just how many times is one supposed to forgive? Peter may have expected a pat on the back for the perceptiveness of his suggestion. Seven times would seem to represent completeness. He could hardly expect Jesus’ reply of seventy-seven times. In essence the intent is to forgive into infinity. At the fourth teaching, Matthew 19:1-9, it becomes narrow even more. It has moved from the broad group, to the circle of acquaintances, and now comes to the marriage relationship, the one who knows most intimately. The Pharisees say Moses “commanded” divorce. Jesus quickly corrects that to say Moses “permitted” divorce, and then

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<sup>47</sup> Orton, “Grasshoppers”: 499.

<sup>48</sup> Though David A. Orton sees this one as a “vulnerable follower of the shepherd, at the mercy of the wild animals (10:16) and apt to stray (18:12-14).” Orton, “Grasshoppers”: 499.

<sup>49</sup> Hagner, Word, 523.

proceeds to predate the law with the authority of the Father in the beginning. In the family relationship, which has bearing literally on “little ones”, his admonition is to stay married always, except in cases of marital unfaithfulness. At the fifth loci the living water bubbles as Jesus’ focus becomes most narrow again, Matthew 19:10-12. The focus is upon single-minded devotion. He has quite literally moved from the one on the outside, to the one on the inside, that is, the eunuch who is uniquely set apart. Whether born this way, made so by men, or choosing to renounce marriage for the sake of “the kingdom of heaven”, eunuchs will literally avoid the millstone necklaces of those who “cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin” (Matt 18:6). The last book end reinforces the idea that Jesus loves children. There is resolve as Jesus announces “the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matt 19:15).

### **Special Emphasis on Humility**

The kingdom belongs to the ones who have embraced the humility his rule requires. R. A. Guelich has written about the development of this term, humility, in Matthew. It takes on characteristics of the underprivileged, those who have been overlooked and neglected in society. And it also indicates shameful behavior that has pigeonholed them with disgrace.

The terms *‘aniyyîm* and *‘anâwîm* within the OT context were essentially synonymous, each sharing a socio-economic as well as a religious meaning. This synonymous relationship apparently broke down in later Judaism. The one, *‘anâwîm*, remained primarily a virtue, ‘humility,’ praised by the rabbis; the other, *‘aniyyîm*, became a term of opprobrium used by the rabbis for those whose socio-economic lot supposedly prevented them from keeping the law.<sup>50</sup>

Orton confirms this as well. “The emphasis here ... is not on their humility as a virtue, but of their being of low standing, needing special nurture and care.”<sup>51</sup> They are very disadvantaged. They are not “little ones” because of their physical stature but because of their insignificance. In their humble state they can easily be overlooked, neglected or despised. Carson remarks, “This child is held up as

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<sup>50</sup> R. A. Guelich, “Matthean Beatitudes: ‘Entrance Requirements’ or Eschatological Blessings?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 no 3 S 1976: 425.

<sup>51</sup> Orton, “Grasshoppers”: 500.

an ideal, not of innocence, purity, or faith, but of humility and unconcern for social status. Jesus advocates humility of mind (v. 4), not childishness of thought (cf. 10:16). With such humility comes childlike trust.”<sup>52</sup> Hagner chimes in, “The status of the disciples before God was like that of dependent little children, and their corresponding attitude was to be like a childlike humility, not pride of position or power.”<sup>53</sup> France drives this home, “Its meaning is ... closer to ‘humiliate’.”<sup>54</sup> This humility piece is a key component in kingdom of God understanding.

### Conclusion

In summary, I have asserted that children exude worth simply by virtue of being alive. Jesus models the child not simply because he is an example, but also because *he is* a child. So when Jesus places him on exhibit it is not only to say copy him, or study him; but it is also for the purpose of validating the special place that children have in the heart of God. At what point a person ceases to be a child is too difficult to ascertain and must be left to the brilliance of the mind of Christ.

Lastly, there are qualities of the child that should be emulated by adults. It is the reverse of the norm. Usually adults show children how to do things. Jesus says, in essence, *you could learn a few things from this unassuming child*. Start first by noticing his helpless pedigree. That humility is of paramount importance if you are to ascertain the values of the kingdom. Then begin to treat the ones around you with the kind of respect and demeanor they are deserving of and that you hope for. The kingdom is not about grasping and accumulating. The kingdom is about giving and forgiving.

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<sup>52</sup> Carson, *Expositor's*, 397.

<sup>53</sup> Hagner, *Word*, 518.

<sup>54</sup> France, *NICNT*, 679.

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