



Childlike Faith

by Dale Fincher

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All my life I have heard that in order to come to Jesus one must have a "childlike faith." I had a difficult time with that concept for many years, for it usually meant that one must have the "naiveté," "simplicity," or even the "blind resolve" of a child. This did not reconcile with what I saw in the rest of the Scripture regarding how we are to think of God. Solomon obviously did not hold this view when he wrote, "How blessed is the man who finds wisdom and the man who gains understanding" (Prov 3:13). David says to "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8). Furthermore, when I looked up the meaning of "faith" in the original language, I found that it involved having confidence in something that was trustworthy (or faithful). It did not imply anything associated with acting blindly.

I recently received a letter from a lady expressing the tension she was finding in her own life. On one side she wrestled with some of the more difficult doctrines and truths of Scripture. But on the other

side she continued to hear she should have a "childlike faith." This was an impossible reconciliation for her and left her somewhat spiritually paralyzed.

Where did we get this idea of "childlike faith"? I searched through nearly a dozen different English translations to find the phrase. I could not find it. Rather, the only reference that emerged was the familiar passage of Jesus in Matthew 18:3, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

It is easy to take verses like this out of context. If it were true that Jesus wanted us to make an endless list of metaphors for children, he would have certainly left us with an interesting picture. The picture that usually comes to the modern mind is one of "simplicity." Children accept everything you tell them, whether you are a parent or a sinister bully on the playground. "Never talk to strangers," responsible parents tell their kids for good reason.

But other metaphors come to mind that would certainly not apply. Children love to wear their ice cream as well as eat it. Does God want us to become like little children and smear hot fudge across our

faces? Children love to chew on their fingers in public. Is Jesus asking us to do the same? How are we to know which metaphors we are to use? Simplicity? Hot fudge? Fingers in the mouth?

If we look at the context of the verse, Jesus spells out what he means in using the metaphor of becoming like a child. It has nothing to do with the popular meaning we attribute to "childlike faith." In fact, the verse does not even use the word "faith." Rather, Jesus says, "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4).

Read in context, we see that Jesus is referring to one particular attribute of children that is naturally lost in grown-ups. When he speaks of becoming like a child, Jesus means this: humility.

Brennan Manning spells it out this way, "For the disciple of Jesus 'becoming like a little child' means the willingness to accept oneself as being of little account and to be regarded as unimportant," and may I add—that God is of great account and of utmost importance.

When I look across the landscape of the New Testament I see a church that believed in a Christ who was bodily raised from the dead. They believed it because they had adequate evidence and testimony for it. And when Paul says, "The just shall live by faith," it is because God's character and "faithfulness" is such that we can bank on his promises. When we cry out to Him in humility, He will hear us. Mature Christians believe in Christ because he is true and is an explanation on which all of life and reality can be based.

Let us do away with this cultural misconception that "childlike faith" equals "intellectual simplicity"; and let us walk boldly forward as humble children of God into the wisdom and greatness the Kingdom of God affords.

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