

Turning The Hearts Of The Fathers To The Children

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We are very blessed in the church, as you all know. We are surrounded by complete families with mothers and lots of children and fathers. But that is not the case with most of the world around us. According to the census taken in 2023 in the US, roughly 30% of families with children under 18 are single parent families. Eighty percent of those are parented by single mothers, so that means that about 25% of American families are fatherless. That has effects.

Seventy percent of juveniles in state institutions come from single parent homes, and the impact lasts all the way through adulthood. Adults who came from single parent homes are three times as likely to be criminally involved. These are pretty discouraging statistics, and they can make us weep for the world, but fortunately, we are not of the world. Turn with me to Matthew 18. Jesus gives us a gentle image with a powerful message.

Matthew 18:1-5 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then Jesus called a little child to Him, and set him in the midst of them and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me."

Let us break it down. The question from the disciples reflects their worldliness at this time. Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? They are expecting a Messiah who is here to set up His kingdom, and they want in. The question implies status, prominence, and power. They want to see where they are going to fit into that structure.

On the other hand, children were seen in that culture as insignificant. But Jesus shocks them to the core by calling a little child, one of the things that these guys are probably used to completely ignoring. But consider for a moment. Was not John the Baptist called to an evil and adulterous generation in order to turn the hearts of the fathers away from their current focus and toward the children? This was not for nothing.

Jesus then states three simple instructions from that same quote. 1) The goal of your conversion is to become like little children. Study the best of them, seek the ways in which they naturally portray godly characteristics. How? By observing, meditating on it, and imitating it.

2) One obvious characteristic of children is self-evident. They are humble. I know what you are saying you parents. Jesus uses this characteristic to redefine greatness as humility. Children do not generally think they are God's gift to mankind yet. And Jesus has given us one attribute of many that He could have listed.

3) Receive them. What on earth could that mean? Sit down with them, talk to them, listen to their tales and voices, love and absorb the innocence they have to offer, and then do what they do when you are with Christ.

This story should still shock us and underscore the value God places on those society might overlook. A childlike attitude is not about immaturity but about trust, openness, and humility, even the childlike state of innocence is given to us by Jesus Christ at baptism.

This simile from Jesus Christ is a call for self-examination. To reinforce it, we are given a very clear and concrete example of little children among us. You do not necessarily see them here because they are down below their parents' shoulders or down on the floor. Their parents are doing a great job. I encourage you not to waste this chance to learn from them. This is required for entry into the Kingdom of heaven.

In Ephesians 5:1, Paul says,

Ephesians 5:1 Therefore, be imitators of God as dear children.

Or actually a better translation in my opinion from the Amplified Bible says,

Ephesians 5:1 (Amplified) Therefore become imitators of God [copy Him and follow His example], as well-beloved children [imitate their father].

Paul shows another attribute of children. They are watching and listening, learning and imitating what is going on all around them. My son recently said to me, "Little pitchers have big ears." God expects us to be imitators as the children are.

Watch a caterpillar as it climbs up a grass stalk. It yearns with every step to get towards the sunlight. It is innate. Little children are like that. When we were very young, we attempted to escape our childhood, climbing up and out of it into adulthood with every step we took.

If we are very young now, we are probably attempting to escape our childhood. We all have a desire to grow up, to appear as grown-ups, virtuous, mature, intellectual, wise, knowledgeable, and you should abound in some of those things. But we can also overshoot, longing to appear sophisticated, cosmopolitan, glamorous, popular, and renowned. It is at times like this that we should be imitators of God as dear children who do not want to take Dad's place but be like Him.

Let us turn to another scripture. It is also in Matthew, Matthew 11. A simile also told by Jesus Christ, and this shows a deep emotional appeal, and I want to dig into it. It is a cry from the children for an audience.

Matthew 11:16-19 "But to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, and saying, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not lament.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children."

Some people will just not be satisfied. This is so full of richness that we should dissect it too. Many commentators suggest that Jesus made this parable up. But actually, as you know, Ecclesiastes 3, verse 4 says,

Ecclesiastes 3:4 A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance.

Almost a direct parallel.

Aesop, the ancient Greek storyteller living in the 6th century BC during the time of the fall of Judah (and there is an Aesop fable), that goes like this.

A fisherman tries to catch a fish by playing his flute expecting them to be charmed by the music and leap into his net. The fish, however, remain unresponsive, ignoring the flute's tune. Frustrated, the fisherman abandons the flute, picks up his net, and casts it into the water, successfully catching the fish. He then scolds them, saying they should have danced when he played the music, but now it's too late.

So we played the flute for you and you did not dance. An ancient Jewish tradition, the flute was played at weddings. The children playing in the marketplace are imitating weddings they have seen, but they are being ignored. And this world ignores the metaphor of the Kingdom of God as a wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14). We mourned for you and you did not lament. The children in the marketplace are imitating funeral dirges but their busy parents are ignoring them.

In parallel, God warns His people not to ignore the signs around them but to hear and understand, to see and perceive. I am basically quoting from Isaiah 6:9-10. In fact, Isaiah tells them that they are too late.

Then Jesus scolds that generation and by inference the modern world when He says, you ignored John the Baptist when he said to repent, and now you fail to celebrate the Son of God when He is among you. You are unresponsive in all things, just like the Laodiceans who are neither hot nor cold but uncommitted, or like the cows of Bashan who crushed the needy while calling for bowls of wine, committed to the wrong things.

A child has a warm and loving relationship they are experiencing with their parents. And a true Christian should have a warm and loving relationship that they are experiencing with God. That is the way that we should be as little children.

Let us turn to Matthew 23. We are not going very far afield. When I look at our young mothers and fathers gently and firmly loving their brood, I cannot help but recall the profound look into the heart of God our Father and Jesus Christ, who says,

Matthew 23:37-39 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

Jesus is lamenting His own death in Jerusalem, coming up very soon. He is also lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD coming up soon also, and He foreshadows the time of Jacob's troubles, as well coming up soon. The repeated word Jerusalem, Jerusalem, cries of personal anguish, much like the repeated Martha, Martha in Luke 10:41. God's love for us has always been there, as ours should be for these little children.

The New Living Translation of Hosea 11:1 goes like this:

Hosea 11:1-4 (NLT) "When Israel was a child, I loved him [basically paraphrasing God speaking] and I called My son out of Egypt. But the more I called to him, the farther he moved from me, offering sacrifices to the images of Baal and burning incense to idols. I myself taught Israel how to walk, leading him along by the hand. But he doesn't know or even care that it was I who took care of him. I led Israel along with My ropes of kindness and love. I lifted the yoke from his neck, and I myself stooped to feed him."

God has always desired the loving personal relationship with His children. We should too. The last two verses of the Old Testament, starting in Malachi 4:5. Malachi is quoting the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 4:5-6 "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

The Lord of hosts says, I will send you. This is a prophecy written between 450 and 430 BC about a future event, and we know it to be about the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets, at the very least, John the Baptist. In Luke 1:16 in the New Testament, the angel of the Lord, Gabriel, he who stands in the presence of God gives glad tidings to Zacharias about his coming son John the Baptist.

Luke 1:16-17 "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Restoration of familial relationships is highlighted as a critical component needed to avert the coming divine judgment.

I want to bring you some good news. NBC News Decision Desk recently did a poll of 2,970 people in Gen Z. Perhaps you read this. These are people from age 18 to 29, and this is a widely quoted and respected poll.

The poll highlights differences in views on politics, success, marriage, and children within this demographic, Gen Z. It highlights other things, but I am pulling out that piece of it. In the poll, a large group of Gen Z men ranked having children as the top factor in defining personal success. That is a startling change in direction in this nation. Now, I am no prophet, and, but it is nice to see some good news occasionally.

Now, I am also not ignorant. I have three children and seven grandchildren. I realize they can be little scamps and need discipline. They are learning how to do the maths and the sciences, dressing themselves and cooking things, manipulating and wheedling, but are they not imitating the things that they see?

Jesus Christ clearly states that He wants us to seek the best lessons from them. We can glean a lot from those joyous times when everyone is rested, is well fed, has had a drink of water, and the children are at their best, and they will learn from all of us as well.

Children in the church are now walking under the almost complete guidance of their parents, but they are influenced by all of us. And they are strongly influenced by God to the extent that their parents are responsive to Him. For the sake of the future of our family and God's Family, we should all be praying for those parents. At the same time, when they are at their best, we should be like the little children.