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LIKE HEAVEN LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN!

Today's Text: Matt. 18: 1-10

Extracts:

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, 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*” [Matt. 18: 1-4]

Children from Creative Steps Day Camp, Pennsylvania, USA, were offered swimming privileges at the pool of Valley Swim Club in the suburb of Philadelphia for which they had paid almost US\$2,000.¹ On 29 June 2009, sixty-five children, mostly black and Hispanic kids, from the day camp came to use the pool. Soon after, the club revoked the pool privileges and refunded the payment that the day-care centre had made. The children alleged that they had heard some club members use racial slurs, such as why “black children were there,” and raising concerns that “they might steal from us.” The club management’s explanation on 30 June 2009 that there was concern that a lot of kids “would change the complexion and atmosphere of the club” merely fueled the racist charge. Since then, the club has tried to do damage control but it appears too late. The director of the day-care centre says that her children had been “emotionally damaged” by the incident. The club may ultimately be the loser. If it does not lose membership, it could be crippled by law suits that are bound to follow.

Each new day, we do much damage to our little children and ourselves by such things as the white lies that we tell in their presence, the curses that we rain on them or others when we are angry, and the bad examples that we show them. They all add up to much over time. In today’s Bible text, Jesus seriously warns us to take heed that we do not despise little children because their angels always see the face of their Father in heaven. Therefore, we have much to learn from little children because of theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Today’s lesson will certainly open our eyes on the subject.

¹ Story based on the following sources: Susan Candiotti and Ross Levitt, “Swim club offers olive branch after racism charges,” <http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/07/12/pennsylvania.pool.problems/index.html> and NBC News, “Philly club apologizes for booting campers; denies racial intent,” <http://www.wbir.com/news/national/story.aspx?storyid=92839&catid=16>

1. Background: Not enough ado about little children!

We shall use the term, little children, to refer to kids who have not yet attained the age of reason. They have not yet been taught cultural or religious prejudices by their parents or “high priests.” Nevertheless, they may not be ignorant (lacking knowledge) but they remain generally innocent (blameless)!

As is usual in adult gatherings, the disciples were debating among themselves who was greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus had just told them that His days on earth were numbered. He was heading in the direction of Jerusalem where He would be betrayed and killed. On the third day, He would be raised up [Matt. 17: 22]. Some of the disciples had seen Jesus show “partiality” to Peter, James and John whom He had taken to the high mountain to witness His Transfiguration [vv. 1- 8]. At Capernaum, those who collected the temple tax had asked Jesus and His disciples for theirs. Jesus had sent Peter to the sea with specific instructions to open the mouth of the fish that he would catch where he would find the piece of money to pay the taxes for both of them [vv. 25-27]. Understandably, the fires of rivalry had been kindled!

They brought their concerns to Jesus and asked Him, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” [Matt. 18: 1]. In response, Jesus called a little child to Him and set him in the midst of His disciples. Then, he 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” [vv. 2-3]. That is a serious matter! After all, how many little children were among the twelve apostles? Yes, some little children came with their parents to see or hear Jesus speak. Yes, during His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, children cried out in the temple, saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” an act over which the chief priests and scribes were indignant [Matt. 21: 15]. What makes little children closer to the kingdom of heaven than the rest of us who are raising them? That is why we need to pay serious attention to what Jesus is saying to us right now.

What do little children know or have that we lack? Here are some of them as revealed by the Lord Himself:

a) *Little children are innocent!*

Jesus says that we must “be converted and become as little children” or we would “by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” [Matt. 18: 3]. When John the apostle was shown a vision of “the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,” he was told that “the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters and *all liars*” would not have a place there [Rev. 21: 1,2, 8].. If you look at the sins listed therein, little children are not even capable of committing them. For example:

- Little children are so naïve through lack of experience of life or failure as to read any meanings into the motives of others. So, they tell it like it is. You will recall the classical story of a king who was said to be wearing invisible clothes. His subjects knew that their monarch was not wearing any clothes but they dared not say it. However, a little child cried out, “Look the king is naked!” Little children will never lie. For example, a little child picks up the phone. The person on the other side wants to speak to her mum. Her mother tells her to inform the caller that she is not at home. What do you expect that little girl to say? Quite simple and straightforward, “Mummy is here and she says to tell you she is not at home!” How many adults can tell it that bluntly?
- Little children have as yet no sense of right and wrong. Therefore, they *cannot* steal, cheat or be sexually immoral unless they are under adult influence. They are like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before Satan tempted them to eat of the fruit of the tree of good and evil. Before the temptation, Adam and his wife “were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.” That was a pure state of innocence. But after their fall, “the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked” [Gen. 2: 9, 25; 3: 1-7].

b) Little children are humble

Jesus also told His disciples, “Therefore, whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” [Matt. 18: 4]. On the matter of greatness, Jesus had earlier told His disciples that, among those born of women, there had not arisen one greater than John the Baptist. Nevertheless, “he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” [Matt. 11: 11]. Elsewhere, he also told His disciples, “Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant” [Matt. 20: 26]. We can infer from those statements that humility means taking less than you deserve for the sake of others. You give instead of taking. You forgive instead of avenging. You bless instead of cursing.

Little children may deserve the attention of their parents but they do not ask for much. A few toys will do. They do not keep grudges or diaries of hurts! Little children can fight this moment and be friends the next moment without any memory of the immediate past. They do not envy winners even though they may cry when they lose. They are the most helpless or the weakest members of the family and yet they command the most attention. Humility pays!

c) Their guardian angels see the face of God always!

Jesus told His disciples, “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven, their angels always see the face of My Father, who is in heaven” [Matt. 18: 10]. Angels are “ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation” [Heb. 1: 14]. When we do God’s will, guardian angels become enemies to our enemies and adversaries to our adversaries [Ex. 23: 22]. Since little children are innocent and humble, you can imagine what God will do to those who despise them. For example, for massacring children under two years old, hoping to thereby kill the infant Jesus, Herod paid with his own life [Matt. 2: 20].

There is something about little children that I can never understand. For example, God protects them against overwhelming odds. Take two recent instances. A Yemeni Airways flight from Yemeni’s capital, Sanaa, to the island of Comoros (in the Indian Ocean) with 153 passengers crashed but only one child survived.² In Vancouver, Canada, a toddler celebrating his third birthday was found unhurt and unfazed after he floated nearly eight miles down a river riding atop his toy truck! He had wandered off unnoticed from his parents who were camping at a popular park near the river.³

Of course, you are also familiar with the biblical story of Moses that his Hebrew mother put in an ark of bulrushes and cast into the Nile River at the age of three months because the Pharaoh had decreed that every male child born to the children of Israel be killed. Moses could have died of hunger in that floating ark, even though his sister was watching from a disguised distance. However, the daughter of Pharaoh who happened to be bathing in the river heard the cry of a baby. When her maids opened the ark, she said, “This is one of the Hebrews’ children.” Rather than kill him in accordance with the Pharaoh’s order, she “had compassion on him” and made him a prince of Egypt [Ex. 2: 1-10]. Such miracles are more than random. God is using them to tell us something special about little children. That is why we must never do anything to despise them.

2. Threading the right path with little children

Knowingly or otherwise, many of us may have done things for or against little children that God has put under our wings. We may be parents or pastors, teachers or trainers or even producers of movies, radio or television programmes. What are we doing with those little children under our care?

² “Child found alive after plane crashes in sea,”

www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/30/yemen.plane.crash/index.html?ref=mpstoryview

³ Reuters, “Tot survives 8-mile river ride on toy,” www.msnbc.msn.com/id/31910113/us/world_news-wonderful_world/

To appreciate the danger that we face, let us pay attention to the following warnings that Jesus gave to His disciples:

a) *Receive them in the name of Jesus*

Jesus said, “Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me” [Matt. 18: 5]. Look at the “audit list” that Jesus will use to judge us on the last day. When the just come to Him, He will say to them, “Come you blessed of My Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” What did this people do? The Lord said that they fed Him when He was hungry, and gave Him water to drink when He was thirsty. They took Him in when He was a stranger, clothed Him when He was naked, visited Him when He was sick and came to see Him while he was in prison. In response to their question when all such things happened, He would say, “Inasmuch as you did it to *one of the least of My brothers, you did it to Me*” [Matt. 25: 34-40]. Are little children not among the least of His brethren?

How do you see the little children that God has put under your control or brought to your attention for help? Do you see them as opportunities to thank God for His mercies in your life? Do you pay attention to their material, emotional and spiritual needs? If you have no money to give, how about time or counsel? Who knows? That little child that you have helped today may be a future doctor to save the life of one of your own grandchildren or a missionary to glorify Christ in your own part of the world!

b) *Show them good examples!*

Jesus also warned, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea” [Matt. 18: 6]. In other words, those who lead little children astray are going to face the wrath of God. We may do so in one or more of the following ways:

- When we fail to correct a child in error. The secular world has misled us to believe that it is child abuse to chastise or correct our children when they are wrong. If we succumb to such spirit of error, we may wind up with untrained and uncouth children who become dangerous to us in our old age. The word of God says, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” [Prov. 22: 6]. It is not love to spoil your child because a good parent chastises the child s(he) loves [Prov. 3: 11-12].
- When we lead good children into error. We may not know what little children watching us are copying. For example, some

children do not see their parents working or doing any legitimate business but they see them spending money without regard. They may grow up with the impression that you do not have to work to make money. Some young church goers see their pastors faking spirituality or sleeping with his members or stealing church funds. If nothing is done to check such excesses, they may get away with the impression that misconduct is acceptable. When they grow up, some children may take to sexual immorality, or join street gangs or sell drugs and cite their upbringing for their actions.

God will not spare those who mislead little children who believe in Him to sin. He will drown them in the depth of the sea of shame and humiliation. Therefore, we should be enablers and mentors that bring little children to the full knowledge of Christ.

3. Conclusion: A true child of God is always His little child!

No matter how old you are, your parents will always see you as their little child! You are a child of God if you are converted and have accepted Jesus as your Lord and Saviour [**Jn 1: 12; Rom. 8: 14-16**]. You remain God's little child as long as you remain in fellowship. Jesus made this point more clearly. Before His death, He told His disciples, "No longer do I call you *servants*, for a servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you *friends*, for all things that I heard from My Father, I have made known to you" [**Jn 15: 15**]. But after His resurrection, when He appeared to Peter and his colleagues fishing on the Sea of Tiberias, He asked them, "*Children*, have you any food?" [**Jn 21: 1-5**]. Since Peter was much older than Jesus (as a man), Christ spoke to them as their Lord and God. In fact, Thomas had already affirmed that earlier when Jesus showed him the scars on His hands and side, by calling Him, "My Lord and my God" [**Jn 20: 28**]. Therefore, nobody can put you down *as long as you remain God's little child*. Whoever tries to despise or humiliate you will face your Father's wrath!

Like heaven like little children.