

The Child in the Midst

by George MacDonald

The sermon explores the significance of childlikeness and humility in the kingdom of God, urging believers to embrace these qualities in their faith and interactions with others.

Scripture: Matthew 18:3-19, Mark 9:33, Luke 9:48, John 13:20, Hebrews 12:6, James 4:10, 1 John 3:1

Topics: "Childlike Faith", "Humility In God"

Description

George MacDonald preaches on the lesson Jesus gave his disciples about humility and the true nature of greatness in the kingdom of heaven, using a child as an example of childlike faith and humility. He delves into the divine revelation of God's character as childlike, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and embracing the childlike qualities in ourselves and others to understand and receive God. MacDonald highlights the profound truth that to receive a child in the name of Jesus is to receive God Himself, as God's essence is reflected in the innocence and trust of a child. He challenges the traditional views of God as a distant, majestic ruler, presenting a God who is intimately involved in every aspect of His creation, especially in the simplicity and devotion of childlike faith.

Transcript

And he came to Capernaum: and, being in the house, he asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves who should be the greatest. And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. And he took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me; and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me. Mark ix. 33-37.

Of this passage in the life of our Lord, the account given by St Mark is the more complete. But it may be enriched and its lesson rendered yet more evident from the record of St Matthew.

"Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whoso shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."

These passages record a lesson our Lord gave his disciples against ambition, against emulation. It is not for the sake of setting forth this lesson that I write about these words of our Lord, but for the sake of a truth, a revelation about God, in which his great argument reaches its height.

He took a little child--possibly a child of Peter; for St Mark says that the incident fell at Capernaum, and "in the house,"--a child therefore with some of the characteristics of Peter, whose very faults were those of a childish nature. We might expect the child of such a father to possess the childlike countenance and bearing essential to the conveyance of the lesson which I now desire to set forth as contained in the passage.

For it must be confessed that there are children who are not childlike. One of the saddest and not least common sights in the world is the face of a child whose mind is so brimful of worldly wisdom that the human childishness has vanished from it, as well as the divine childlikeness. For the childlike is the divine, and the very word "marshals me the way that I was going." But I must delay my ascent to the final argument in order to remove a possible difficulty, which, in turning us towards one of the grandest truths, turns us away from the truth which the Lord had in view here.

The difficulty is this: Is it like the Son of man to pick out the beautiful child, and leave the common child unnoticed? What thank would he have in that? Do not even the publicans as much as that? And do not our hearts revolt against the thought of it? Shall the mother's heart cleave closest to the deformed of her little ones? and shall "Christ as we believe him" choose according to the sight of the eye? Would he turn away from the child born in sin and taught iniquity, on whose pinched face hunger and courage and love of praise have combined to stamp the cunning of avaricious age, and take to his arms the child of honest parents, such as Peter and his wife, who could not help looking more good than the other? That were not he who came to seek and to save that which was lost. Let the man who loves his brother say which, in his highest moments of love to God, which, when he is nearest to that ideal humanity whereby a man shall be a hiding-place from the wind, he would clasp to his bosom of refuge. Would it not be the evil-faced child, because he needed it most? Yes; in God's name, yes. For is not that the divine way? Who that has read of the lost sheep, or the found prodigal, even if he had no spirit bearing witness with his spirit, will dare to say that it is not the divine way? Often, no doubt, it will appear otherwise, for the childlike child is easier to save than the other, and may come first. But the rejoicing in heaven is greatest over the sheep that has wandered the farthest--perhaps was born on the wild hill-side, and not in the fold at all. For such a prodigal, the elder brother in heaven prays thus--"Lord, think about my poor brother more than about me, for I know thee, and am at rest in thee. I am with thee always."

Why, then, do I think it necessary to say that this child was probably Peter's child, and certainly a child that looked childlike because it was childlike? No amount of evil can be the child. No amount of evil, not to say in the face, but in the habits, or even in the heart of the child, can make it cease to be a child, can annihilate the divine idea of childhood which moved in the heart of God when he made that child after his own image. It is the essential of which God speaks, the real by which he judges, the undying of which he is the God.

Heartily I grant this. And if the object of our Lord in taking the child in his arms had been to teach love to our neighbour, love to humanity, the ugliest child he could have found, would, perhaps, have served his purpose best. The man who receives any, and more plainly he who receives the repulsive child, because he is the offspring of God, because he is his own brother born, must receive the Father in thus receiving the child. Whosoever gives a cup of cold water to a little one, refreshes the heart of the Father. To do as

God does, is to receive God; to do a service to one of his children is to receive the Father. Hence, any human being, especially if wretched and woe-begone and outcast, would do as well as a child for the purpose of setting forth this love of God to the human being. Therefore something more is probably intended here. The lesson will be found to lie not in the humanity, but in the childhood of the child.

Again, if the disciples could have seen that the essential childhood was meant, and not a blurred and half-obliterated childhood, the most selfish child might have done as well, but could have done no better than the one we have supposed in whom the true childhood is more evident. But when the child was employed as a manifestation, utterance, and sign of the truth that lay in his childhood, in order that the eyes as well as the ears should be channels to the heart, it was essential--not that the child should be beautiful but--that the child should be childlike; that those qualities which wake in our hearts, at sight, the love peculiarly belonging to childhood, which is, indeed, but the perception of the childhood, should at least glimmer out upon the face of the chosen type. Would such an unchildlike child as we see sometimes, now in a great house, clothed in purple and lace, now in a squalid close, clothed in dirt and rags, have been fit for our Lord's purpose, when he had to say that his listeners must become like this child? when the lesson he had to present to them was that of the divine nature of the child, that of childlikeness? Would there not have been a contrast between the child and our Lord's words, ludicrous except for its horror, especially seeing he set forth the individuality of the child by saying, "this little child," "one of such children," and "these little ones that believe in me?" Even the feelings of pity and of love that would arise in a good heart upon further contemplation of such a child, would have turned it quite away from the lesson our Lord intended to give.

That this lesson did lie, not in the humanity, but in the childhood of the child, let me now show more fully. The disciples had been disputing who should be the greatest, and the Lord wanted to show them that such a dispute had nothing whatever to do with the way things went in his kingdom. Therefore, as a specimen of his subjects, he took a child and set him before them. It was not, it could not be, in virtue of his humanity, it was in virtue of his childhood that this child was thus presented as representing a subject of the kingdom. It was not to show the scope but the nature of the kingdom. He told them they could not enter into the kingdom save by becoming little children--by humbling themselves. For the idea of ruling was excluded where childlikeness was the one essential quality. It was to be no more who should rule, but who should serve; no more who should look down upon his fellows from the conquered heights of authority--even of sacred authority, but who should look up honouring humanity, and ministering unto it, so that humanity itself might at length be persuaded of its own honour as a temple of the living God. It was to impress this lesson upon them that he showed them the child. Therefore, I repeat, the lesson lay in the childhood of the child.

But I now approach my especial object; for this lesson led to the enunciation of a yet higher truth, upon which it was founded, and from which indeed it sprung. Nothing is required of man that is not first in God. It is because God is perfect that we are required to be perfect. And it is for the revelation of God to all the human souls, that they may be saved by knowing him, and so becoming like him, that this child is thus chosen and set before them in the gospel. He who, in giving the cup of water or the embrace, comes into contact with the essential childhood of the child--that is, embraces the childish humanity of it, (not he who embraces it out of love to humanity, or even love to God as the Father of it)--is partaker of the meaning, that is, the blessing, of this passage. It is the recognition of the childhood as divine that will show the disciple how vain the strife after relative place or honour in the great kingdom.

For it is In my name. This means as representing me; and, therefore, as being like me. Our Lord could not commission any one to be received in his name who could not more or less represent him; for there would be untruth and unreason. Moreover, he had just been telling the disciples that they must become like this child; and now, when he tells them to receive such a little child in his name, it must surely imply something in common between them all--something in which the child and Jesus meet--something in which the child and the disciples meet. What else can that be than the spiritual childhood? In my name does not mean because I will it. An arbitrary utterance of the will of our Lord would certainly find ten thousand to obey it, even to suffering, for one that will be able to receive such a vital truth of his character as is contained in the words; but it is not obedience alone that our Lord will have, but obedience to the truth, that is, to the Light of the World, truth beheld and known. In my name, if we take all we can find in it, the full meaning which alone will harmonize and make the passage a whole, involves a revelation from resemblance, from fitness to represent and so reveal. He who receives a child, then, in the name of Jesus, does so, perceiving wherein Jesus and the child are one, what is common to them. He must not only see the ideal child in the child he receives--that reality of loveliness which constitutes true childhood, but must perceive that the child is like Jesus, or rather, that the Lord is like the child, and may be embraced, yea, is embraced, by every heart childlike enough to embrace a child for the sake of his childness. I do not therefore say that none but those who are thus conscious in the act partake of the blessing. But a special sense, a lofty knowledge of blessedness, belongs to the act of embracing a child as the visible likeness of the Lord himself. For the blessedness is the perceiving of the truth--the blessing is the truth itself--the God-known truth, that the Lord has the heart of a child. The man who perceives this knows in himself that he is blessed--blessed because that is true.

But the argument as to the meaning of our Lord's words, in my name, is incomplete, until we follow our Lord's enunciation to its second and higher stage: "He that receiveth me, receiveth him that sent me." It will be allowed that the connection between the first and second link of the chain will probably be the same as the connection between the second and third. I do not say it is necessarily so; for I aim at no logical certainty. I aim at showing, rather than at proving, to my reader, by means of my sequences, the idea to which I am approaching. For if, once he beholds it, he cannot receive it, if it does not shew itself to him to be true, there would not only be little use in convincing him by logic, but I allow that he can easily suggest other possible connections in the chain, though, I assert, none so symmetrical. What, then, is the connection between the second and third? How is it that he who receives the Son receives the Father? Because the Son is as the Father; and he whose heart can perceive the essential in Christ, has the essence of the Father--that is, sees and holds to it by that recognition, and is one therewith by recognition and worship. What, then, next, is the connection between the first and second? I think the same. "He that sees the essential in this child, the pure childhood, sees that which is the essence of me," grace and truth--in a word, childlikeness. It follows not that the former is perfect as the latter, but it is the same in kind, and therefore, manifest in the child, reveals that which is in Jesus.

Then to receive a child in the name of Jesus is to receive Jesus; to receive Jesus is to receive God; therefore to receive the child is to receive God himself.

That such is the feeling of the words, and that such was the feeling in the heart of our Lord when he spoke them, I may show from another golden thread that may be traced through the shining web of his golden words.

What is the kingdom of Christ? A rule of love, of truth--a rule of service. The king is the chief servant in it. "The kings of the earth have dominion: it shall not be so among you." "The Son of Man came to minister."

"My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." The great Workman is the great King, labouring for his own. So he that would be greatest among them, and come nearest to the King himself, must be the servant of all. It is like king like subject in the kingdom of heaven. No rule of force, as of one kind over another kind. It is the rule of kind, of nature, of deepest nature--of God. If, then, to enter into this kingdom, we must become children, the spirit of children must be its pervading spirit throughout, from lowly subject to lowliest king. The lesson added by St Luke to the presentation of the child is: "For he that is least among you all, the same shall be great." And St Matthew says: "Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Hence the sign that passes between king and subject. The subject kneels in homage to the kings of the earth: the heavenly king takes his subject in his arms. This is the sign of the kingdom between them. This is the all-pervading relation of the kingdom.

To give one glance backward, then:

To receive the child because God receives it, or for its humanity, is one thing; to receive it because it is like God, or for its childhood, is another. The former will do little to destroy ambition. Alone it might argue only a wider scope to it, because it admits all men to the arena of the strife. But the latter strikes at the very root of emulation. As soon as even service is done for the honour and not for the service-sake, the doer is that moment outside the kingdom. But when we receive the child in the name of Christ, the very childhood that we receive to our arms is humanity. We love its humanity in its childhood, for childhood is the deepest heart of humanity--its divine heart; and so in the name of the child we receive all humanity. Therefore, although the lesson is not about humanity, but about childhood, it returns upon our race, and we receive our race with wider arms and deeper heart. There is, then, no other lesson lost by receiving this; no heartlessness shown in insisting that the child was a lovable--a childlike child.

If there is in heaven a picture of that wonderful teaching, doubtless we shall see represented in it a dim childhood shining from the faces of all that group of disciples of which the centre is the Son of God with a child in his arms. The childhood, dim in the faces of the men, must be shining trustfully clear in the face of the child. But in the face of the Lord himself, the childhood will be triumphant--all his wisdom, all his truth upholding that radiant serenity of faith in his father. Verily, O Lord, this childhood is life. Verily, O Lord, when thy tenderness shall have made the world great, then, children like thee, will all men smile in the face of the great God.

But to advance now to the highest point of this teaching of our Lord: "He that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me." To receive a child in the name of God is to receive God himself. How to receive him? As alone he can be received,--by knowing him as he is. To know him is to have him in us. And that we may know him, let us now receive this revelation of him, in the words of our Lord himself. Here is the argument of highest import founded upon the teaching of our master in the utterance before us.

God is represented in Jesus, for that God is like Jesus: Jesus is represented in the child, for that Jesus is like the child. Therefore God is represented in the child, for that he is like the child. God is child-like. In the true vision of this fact lies the receiving of God in the child.

Having reached this point, I have nothing more to do with the argument; for if the Lord meant this--that is, if this be a truth, he that is able to receive it will receive it: he that hath ears to hear it will hear it. For our Lord's arguments are for the presentation of the truth, and the truth carries its own conviction to him who is able to receive it.

But the word of one who has seen this truth may help the dawn of a like perception in those who keep their faces turned towards the east and its aurora; for men may have eyes, and, seeing dimly, want to see more. Therefore let us brood a little over the idea itself, and see whether it will not come forth so as to commend itself to that spirit, which, one with the human spirit where it dwells, searches the deep things of God. For, although the true heart may at first be shocked at the truth, as Peter was shocked when he said, "That be far from thee, Lord," yet will it, after a season, receive it and rejoice in it.

Let me then ask, do you believe in the Incarnation? And if you do, let me ask further, Was Jesus ever less divine than God? I answer for you, Never. He was lower, but never less divine. Was he not a child then? You answer, "Yes, but not like other children." I ask, "Did he not look like other children?" If he looked like them and was not like them, the whole was a deception, a masquerade at best. I say he was a child, whatever more he might be. God is man, and infinitely more. Our Lord became flesh, but did not become man. He took on him the form of man: he was man already. And he was, is, and ever shall be divinely childlike. He could never have been a child if he would ever have ceased to be a child, for in him the transient found nothing. Childhood belongs to the divine nature. Obedience, then, is as divine as Will, Service as divine as Rule. How? Because they are one in their nature; they are both a doing of the truth. The love in them is the same. The Fatherhood and the Sonship are one, save that the Fatherhood looks down lovingly, and the Sonship looks up lovingly. Love is all. And God is all in all. He is ever seeking to get down to us--to be the divine man to us. And we are ever saying, "That be far from thee, Lord!" We are careful, in our unbelief, over the divine dignity, of which he is too grand to think. Better pleasing to God, it needs little daring to say, is the audacity of Job, who, rushing into his presence, and flinging the door of his presence--chamber to the wall, like a troubled, it may be angry, but yet faithful child, calls aloud in the ear of him whose perfect Fatherhood he has yet to learn: "Am I a sea or a whale, that thou settest a watch over me?"

Let us dare, then, to climb the height of divine truth to which this utterance of our Lord would lead us.

Does it not lead us up hither: that the devotion of God to his creatures is perfect? that he does not think about himself but about them? that he wants nothing for himself, but finds his blessedness in the outgoing of blessedness.

Ah! it is a terrible--shall it be a lonely glory this? We will draw near with our human response, our abandonment of self in the faith of Jesus. He gives himself to us--shall not we give ourselves to him? Shall we not give ourselves to each other whom he loves?

For when is the child the ideal child in our eyes and to our hearts? Is it not when with gentle hand he takes his father by the beard, and turns that father's face up to his brothers and sisters to kiss? when even the lovely selfishness of love-seeking has vanished, and the heart is absorbed in loving?

In this, then, is God like the child: that he is simply and altogether our friend, our father--our more than friend, father, and mother--our infinite love-perfect God. Grand and strong beyond all that human imagination can conceive of poet-thinking and kingly action, he is delicate beyond all that human tenderness can conceive of husband or wife, homely beyond all that human heart can conceive of father or mother. He has not two thoughts about us. With him all is simplicity of purpose and meaning and effort and end--namely, that we should be as he is, think the same thoughts, mean the same things, possess the same blessedness. It is so plain that any one may see it, every one ought to see it, every one shall see it. It must be so. He is utterly true and good to us, nor shall anything withstand his will.

How terribly, then, have the theologians misrepresented God in the measures of the low and showy, not the lofty and simple humanities! Nearly all of them represent him as a great King on a grand throne, thinking how grand he is, and making it the business of his being and the end of his universe to keep up his glory, wielding the bolts of a Jupiter against them that take his name in vain. They would not allow this, but follow out what they say, and it comes much to this. Brothers, have you found our king? There he is, kissing little children and saying they are like God. There he is at table with the head of a fisherman lying on his bosom, and somewhat heavy at heart that even he, the beloved disciple, cannot yet understand him well. The simplest peasant who loves his children and his sheep were--no, not a truer, for the other is false, but--a true type of our God beside that monstrosity of a monarch.

The God who is ever uttering himself in the changeful profusions of nature; who takes millions of years to form a soul that shall understand him and be blessed; who never needs to be, and never is, in haste; who welcomes the simplest thought of truth or beauty as the return for seed he has sown upon the old fallows of eternity; who rejoices in the response of a faltering moment to the age-long cry of his wisdom in the streets; the God of music, of painting, of building, the Lord of Hosts, the God of mountains and oceans; whose laws go forth from one unseen point of wisdom, and thither return without an atom of loss; the God of history working in time unto christianity; this God is the God of little children, and he alone can be perfectly, abandonedly simple and devoted. The deepest, purest love of a woman has its well-spring in him. Our longing desires can no more exhaust the fulness of the treasures of the Godhead, than our imagination can touch their measure. Of him not a thought, not a joy, not a hope of one of his creatures can pass unseen; and while one of them remains unsatisfied, he is not Lord over all.

Therefore, with angels and with archangels, with the spirits of the just made perfect, with the little children of the kingdom, yea, with the Lord himself, and for all them that know him not, we praise and magnify and laud his name in itself, saying Our Father. We do not draw back for that we are unworthy, nor even for that we are hard-hearted and care not for the good. For it is his childlikeness that makes him our God and Father. The perfection of his relation to us swallows up all our imperfections, all our defects, all our evils; for our childhood is born of his fatherhood. That man is perfect in faith who can come to God in the utter dearth of his feelings and his desires, without a glow or an aspiration, with the weight of low thoughts, failures, neglects, and wandering forgetfulness, and say to him, "Thou art my refuge, because thou art my home."

Such a faith will not lead to presumption. The man who can pray such a prayer will know better than another, that God is not mocked; that he is not a man that he should repent; that tears and entreaties will not work on him to the breach of one of his laws; that for God to give a man because he asked for it that which was not in harmony with his laws of truth and right, would be to damn him--to cast him into the outer darkness. And he knows that out of that prison the childlike, imperturbable God will let no man come till he has paid the uttermost farthing.

And if he should forget this, the God to whom he belongs does not forget it, does not forget him. Life is no series of chances with a few providences sprinkled between to keep up a justly failing belief, but one providence of God; and the man shall not live long before life itself shall remind him, it may be in agony of soul, of that which he has forgotten. When he prays for comfort, the answer may come in dismay and terror and the turning aside of the Father's countenance; for love itself will, for love's sake, turn the countenance away from that which is not lovely; and he will have to read, written upon the dark wall of his imprisoned conscience, the words, awful and glorious, Our God is a consuming fire.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/george-macdonald/the-child-in-the-midst/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net