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Presentation Transcript
Acting Like a Child
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Our title today is *Acting Like a Child*. In our present world, when we say someone is acting like a child, we mean they're immature, experiencing delayed emotional or mental development, unable to think of the needs of others, but self only, or all three. The closest thing the Bible says about this usage is in Proverbs 22, where it says that *foolishness is bound in the heart of a child*. So, it's okay to be immature if you are young. Now, we all have to do that. It's a phase of development that we go through. But with good parenting, children will grow to maturity – not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually as well. But it's an insult to imply that someone who supposed to be mature is acting like a child. So, I think we all get that.

But Jesus take acting like a child in an entirely different direction. Let's look at it in Matthew 18:2 and 3.

Matthew 18:2-3 – *And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them – that's the disciples – and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God.*

Wow! This is one of those scriptures where we read it and we think we know what it means, and then we go on. Trust God. Trust parents. And it *does* mean that, obviously, but there is so much more to it that we dare not go on without understanding. So, let's do that. Let's stop and dig into it a bit and see what more we can learn about acting like a child.

When we tell a child something, they usually believe it. Santa Claus would be a good example. Children are trusting and, in Jesus' example, He's talking about trusting God. No adult would believe such an obviously impossible story as Santa Claus. But there are three reasons children can believe Santa Claus exists. Their life experience is not great enough to have taught them that he couldn't possibly exist. Secondly, their little brains have not developed enough yet to be able to discern the truth of it. And three, parents are a child's first source of information. They're

automatically trusted. So, they first begin to gain their view of the world and themselves from their parents. Then, that expands to siblings and other relatives, and then, teachers. So, if we can believe God, like a little child trustingly believes parents, it requires letting go of what we think we know, and trust what God tells us. That is step one in Christianity – *believe God*.

Look in Matthew 5:3, where Jesus is talking to His disciples upon the mount:

Matthew 5:3 - *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* Paul said it differently way. He said, *“Without faith, it is impossible to please God.”* Now, poor in spirit means two things: One, we are impoverished in spiritual knowledge and actions, knowing nothing about God. He’s outside of our ability to see, feel and experience – maybe not experience, but you get the point. And secondly, anything true about God comes from him. Any truth that we know about God has come from Him, usually indirectly. But that’s where it comes from, because we can’t learn it by ourselves. When it comes to knowing about God, we are poor, blind beggars. Notice what Jesus says we will gain from being like a little child – trusting God, believing what God tells us, acting on the knowledge that God gives us: *“...for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

Now, I think most of us go to when Christ is going to return and set up His kingdom here on earth – the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven brought down here. But it’s not just talking about later, when Christ returns. He’s talking about *now*. Jesus said – and it takes me to this statement of His – “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” What did Jesus say we had to do to gain the kingdom of heaven? “Do not fear. Only believe” – direct quote. Do you know who He said that to? He said it to Jairus, when he learned that his daughter had died. Being like a little child, then, has to do with believing what God says about Himself, about us, about His kingdom, about everything – about His promises. And Jesus also said, “Come you, who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” He said also, “Follow Me. My burden is light.” “All you people, who have anxious hearts, lay down your burden of anxiety, and My peace I will give you.” “If you’re getting old, and your strength is departing, stop fretting about it. I’ve promised to carry you through your old age. Don’t worry about your finances. I know you need clothes to wear and food to eat and a place to keep warm. I’ve got your back! The kingdom of heaven is near. The Father and I will come live in you, and we will bring our Spirit, our obedience, our mercy – the values of the kingdom of heaven – into your heart. And we will help you live the kingdom values now. We’ve got your back!”

If we are like a little child, when it comes to trust, we will believe these things that God tells us. And when Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand,” He wasn’t just talking about the Kingdom of God on earth. He was talking about the spiritual things of the kingdom of heaven for us *now*. Heaven is heaven and the earth is the earth, but the *values* and the beliefs and the laws of the kingdom of heaven are here with us. All we have to do is accept them.

So, how is it that Jesus took a child to Himself? What happened to cause Him to do that? Well, let's look at the context in Matthew 18:1.

Matthew 18:1-4 – *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” So, you can tell what they’re thinking about. And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* So, the presenting issue is, who’s going to be in charge? A child, then, is not only an example to them of trusting belief, but also humility. Notice what He said: “Unless you *turn* and become like children...” The disciples hadn’t made the turn yet. They needed to change their thinking in their hearts. *Whoever humbles himself* – Jesus says in verse 4 – *like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.* You want to be in charge? Do this. Remember now, we’re to be spiritual beggars – poor in spirit – realizing we know nothing about God – like the little child who does not have enough life experience to evaluate his environment accurately, so he leans on the understanding of his parents – like we are to rely on God to understand the realities of the kingdom of heaven.

What was it that David said? He said he’d rather be a doorman in God’s kingdom than live in glory in some other venue. Being a doorman is a servant, isn’t it? And it’s considered the bottom of the heap. Being in the kingdom of heaven is not about being in charge. It’s about *being* there. Like Paul said, “We will be over all things.” There’s plenty of stuff to go around – to be in charge of. Jesus is over us and God is over Jesus. So, it’s not an issue in heaven. It’s a non-issue. It’s not to worry about. But, to wield that power, we must be humble and serve those we are over. Our job of service is like a shepherd who takes care of the sheep – backwards to what we see in the world today – one of the great paradoxes of the kingdom of heaven.

Since we don’t know much about the kingdom yet, we are like little children, who don’t have much experience in life. We must trust God to take us there. And, if we know we are blind and can’t find our way by ourselves, the only way to get there is to trust God. He knows the way.

Okay, so trusting God – that’s an element. What else can we find in the context? Well, another area of childhood that we should look at is forgiving. When I started working as a school counselor, I worked in an elementary school. It was in a Latino neighborhood and I didn’t know much about their culture. I knew some, but not as much as they did. So, I didn’t know their family customs, or their traditional customs – their traditions – and since they were young, and I was old, I didn’t understand a lot of their slang, and I wasn’t familiar with their clothes or hair styles, and I knew nothing about Pokémon or other games. And because of my lack of familiarity, I would make mistakes sometimes. I discovered that, if I would apologize and ask for help with my lack of knowledge, I was instantly forgiven. Sometimes, my lack of correctness was funny to them and sometimes it was insulting. But, if I apologized, they held no grudges. They were forgiving. In fact, once they saw my deficiency, and knew that I was open to help, they would often jump in and help me.

One of my young clients that I recall was a fourth grader with Asperger's Disorder. And, as per her disorder, she was fixated on two topics: China and Pokémon. When she learned that I knew nothing about Pokémon, she began teaching me all about it. Now, Pokémon was not allowed in school – no cards, no figures, nothing. But, one day, in my office, she pulled out a Pikachu doll out of her little bag, and there it was – elementary school contraband right there on my table. She suddenly started ascribing all her feelings and situations to Pikachu. Now, this child had trouble with eye contact and touching and human connection, as related to Asperger's. So, she found a very effective way to tell me about herself without having to look at me or make eye contact or refer directly to herself. She could safely express her feelings through this symbol. I recall one of the things she said was, "Pikachu had bad trainers." That kind of jumped out at me, and I said, "What does she think about that? Is it hard." And she said, "They don't understand me and they take things away" – when they don't understand *her*, pardon me. She was talking about herself – "and they take things away when she doesn't obey." So, we were doing therapy through this medium. And it worked well. She got to express herself in a way that was safe for her, and after a time, she stopped getting behavioral referrals, and settled into life at school. She did that in her own Asperger's kind of way as best she could. But she was getting along better with people. The pressure was off. Talking about it with me, in this indirect way and being understood, was like pressure relief valve for her.

So, that brings me to our next point of learning about why Jesus said we should be like little children. She was open. It was easy to see how she was transmitting her truth to me, once I understood her language.

Notice in Psalms 51:6. It says:

Psalms 51:6 – *Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being* – God wants us to be truthful with ourselves and with others about how we feel. And it says: *...and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.* That's our unconscious – at least partly – understanding ourselves, rather than self-deceiving and deceiving and manipulating others. Children have a way of doing that. That little girl found a very sophisticated way of doing that for herself.

There's one final lesson I'd like to draw for you from the main passage in Matthew 18:5. It says:

Luke 18:5-6 – *Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.* So, it's not good enough to *act* like a child, in the way God is talking, but also to *accept* and *receive* other people in that childlike way. And Jesus is talking about two populations here – at least, two that I know of. He's talking about *new* people – babes in the faith – and children – *real* children, physically. And what He says next applies to both in verse 6: *But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.* That's a pretty intense statement. Why? Well, in verse 10, it says:

V-10, 12-14 – *See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.* Wow! Do you get it? Anything we do to kids is instantly reported to God the Father. Anything we *don't* do to them is as well. So, *what do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you – get this! He's saying – he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.* “So, don't you get in the way and cause that to happen,” is what He is saying.

Don't ignore the kids in your congregation, or act like you're afraid of the new people. Talk to them. Include them. Help them to feel a part of things. God has surrounded all our children with angels, He tells us. It's pretty hard to offend one of them without getting busted for it. God always – *always* – stands up, goes out to find, has the back of the vulnerable.

That word there – *despise* – that can also mean to ignore, or fail to care for, or to find valueless, to disrespect. So, we're supposed to go after them. They're valuable. We're supposed to engage them. Again, why? Well, if we follow the natural order, we will.

I'm a proud grandfather, and I have to tell you a story about one of my grandsons. He and his mother came to the Feast with us at the Common Faith Feast site – more than once, but this one time I'm thinking about – he was a toddler – maybe just a little older. He might have been two. Church is over, and we're sitting on the front row, on the outside edge of the hall, where there's a big wall all the way down to the back, and a fairly narrow aisle to get from the front to the back of the hall. And he's out ahead of me. He's got his little bag, and he's choppin' on down that way, and I'm trying to keep up. Up ahead of us, on the first chair in the aisle, there's a little girl. And she has her head down – she's put her head down – on the chair, and she's looking to the right. So, she's looking kind of out in the aisle, but with her head down, so she can't see much. I don't know whether she was tired, or she was frustrated, or upset, but there she was. My grandson wheels up beside her and puts his face right down beside hers – their noses were almost touching as he looked at her. And he just stayed there for a few seconds, and then up and on he went.

Kids tend to care for kids, unless they learn from their environment that they should care for themselves more. And I just thought that was such an interesting non-verbal there. I don't think he remembered that. But it was just a natural instinctive thing that he did. I think Jesus' connection between our being like a child and caring for the children around us is a *real* one. If we don't care for children, we do not have a childlike attitude. Jesus is looking for that in us. So, we'd better *be* like that.

I said earlier that the kingdom of heaven is not about being in control. It's about being there. And, as Jesus said, “Unless we turn and become like a child, we *won't* be there.” So what's the message? Well, the message is that we need to realize that we're spiritual babies. We're not spiritually mature yet. There's a lot for us that we need to learn. And, unless we learn it, we'll

never be able to be in God's kingdom. And He uses a human child as an example of that – something we can understand. So that takes humility, doesn't it? When it comes to God stuff, we know nothing. He's the One who knows everything and we need to rely on Him.

This is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.

A big thank you to all the people, too, that have donated this past year. It's been amazing. We've been able to do so much with it. We thank you for it. We asked God at the beginning of our work to lay it on the minds of the people that would benefit from our efforts to contribute and He has done that. We know that those of you who contribute are sincere.