

INTRODUCTION

One of the most over-used words in the English language is "great." If you Google the word you'll find over 1.6 billion links. We say so many things are "great" that the word has lost its power. We talk about the Great Lakes, Great Britain, the Great Plains, the Great Wall in China; and the Great White Shark that swims in the Great Barrier Reef. And great balls of fire, even Tony the Tiger tells us that Frosted Flakes are GRRRRreat!

History has dubbed certain leaders with the title "great." You've probably heard of Alexander the Great, Herod the Great, and even Catherine the Great. But Wikipedia reports there has been at least 114 world leaders who had the word "great" used with their names, all the way from Albert the Great to Xerxes the Great.

And if "great" isn't enough, we even have greater and greatest! There were three restaurants on the same block. One restaurant posted a large sign that said, "This is the greatest restaurant in the state." The second restaurant posted a larger sign that bragged, "This is the greatest restaurant in the country." The third restaurant posted a small sign that simply said, "This is the greatest restaurant on this block."

We've overused the word great so much it can even mean the opposite. If you get in your car some morning and find that your battery is dead you might say, "Well, that's just great!" No wonder people have trouble learning the English language!

In our text today, the disciples of Jesus were arguing about which of them was the greatest. When they asked Jesus to weigh in on the issue, Jesus used a child as a living object lesson to teach a profound truth. Humanity awards the title "great" to world leaders, but in the eyes of heaven, greatness is found in the humility of a child. Let's see what Jesus said about being a Kid in His Kingdom.

Matthew 18:1-6. "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: 'I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.'"

In the next chapter, Matthew recorded another encounter that Jesus had with children. Let's read about it as well in Matthew 19:13-15:

"Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there."

In these two passages we discover several truths about Jesus and children. We learn that Jesus loves little children and welcomes them into His arms. We see that it is a good thing for parents to bring their children to Jesus for Him to bless them. We also discover that it is a dangerous offense to hinder children from coming to Jesus. Each of those truths could be an entire message alone. But since this series is about Parables and Miracles, I want to focus on one comment Jesus made in the form of a simile. He told those adult disciples that if they ever wanted to enter the Kingdom of heaven that they must change and become LIKE little children.

That is a revolutionary statement. Some people think children have to become like adults in order to understand enough to trust Jesus. But Jesus said adults must become like children in order to be a part of His kingdom. In one respect, God only has Kids in His Kingdom.

If we're going to become like children again, we've got to understand how a child thinks.

We can learn a lot from kids. Since we've all been a kid at one time in our lives, these aren't NEW qualities we have to learn. They are simply things we need to relearn, or just don't ever stop doing. I'd like to remind you of seven positive child-like qualities we should just keep on expressing.

1. Don't stop giggling with wonder!

If there is one thing we know about kids, they like to have fun. They love to laugh. I was holding Grant, my seven-month old grandson a few nights ago, and he couldn't stop giggling. He was playing with my nose, my hair, my ears, and I was making him laugh. There's nothing more enjoyable than hearing a kid giggle.

The kids in our video talked about the fun they had at the fair. Their eyes lit up with excitement. Whenever I come to my office during the week I walk by the playground of the EEC. When the kids are out there playing there is always one sound that present: Laughter. *Reader's Digest* coined the phrase "Laughter is the Best Medicine." It may not be the *best* medicine, but centuries before *Reader's Digest* God said in Proverbs 17:22, "A cheerful heart is good medicine."

One of the reasons children laugh is because they see wonder in everything. One of my favorite memories as a parent was watching our two daughters on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning. They could hardly go to sleep they were so excited. But they knew the Jolly old fat guy wouldn't leave their Christmas goodies under the tree until they were asleep. Then on Christmas morning, it was the only time we didn't have to get them up—they woke up before we did. And as they rushed into the room with the tree, their eyes were filled with wonder. It was like sensory overload.

That's the same kind of childlike wonder and awe we should have when we think about God. Children live in a fairy tale world where the handsome prince rescues the fair maiden, and they get married and live happily ever after. As we grow older, we no longer live in a fairy tale world, but even as adults, we still have a need to have our hearts filled with wonder. Solomon wrote that God has "set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from

beginning to end." (Ecclesiastes 3:11) There is such a powerful mystery about the ways of God that we should never lose that sense of awe and wonder.

Sadly, many adults have lost a sense of the wonder at the greatness and glory of God. For us, worship is just a humdrum, boring experience. Our attitude is "been there, done that."

In Matthew 21 we read that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the children were shouting, "Hosanna to the King." The Pharisees were indignant and complained to Jesus. They said, "Do you hear what these children are shouting?" Jesus quoted Psalm 8:2 to them and said, "Out of the mouths of babes, You have perfected praise." It's time for some of us adults to start expressing our praise by worshipping the way children worship.

I love to go to Kids Kamp and participate in the worship, because children aren't afraid to sing loud, add motions to the songs, and even shout! I love to hear our children's choirs sing because of the enthusiasm and joy they exhibit. You should be here in the Worship Center for the opening session of VBS, the kids are having a blast! Children aren't shy when it comes to expressing their praise.

I have pastored two churches in the past that were named "First Baptist Church." We took the letters "FBC" and adopted the motto "It's Fun Being a Christian." We should remind ourselves that GABC doesn't just mean Green Acres Baptist Church. GABC could also stand for "Giggle And Be Childlike!"

2. Don't stop playing with your friends!

When I was in elementary school, my favorite class was playtime. We called it recess, but we didn't just sit around, we played kick ball or dodge ball. And we weren't even that competitive. It was just fun to play. We would play football, but we didn't have a goal or sidelines. We played "tackle the one with the ball." It was just fun to play! It wasn't any fun to play by yourself. You wanted to play with your friends.

That's a great lesson for us as adults. We shouldn't ever stop playing with our friends if we want to maintain a child-like attitude. A couple of generations ago, when life was simple, Americans used to worship, work, and play. Today most Americans tend to "worship their work, work at their play; and play at their worship." (Gordon Dahl, *Work, Play, Play in a Leisure Oriented Society*, 1972)

A few years ago, Robert Fulghum, wrote a famous essay entitled, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." His main thoughts have been condensed into this poem: "Most of what I really need; To know about how to live; And what to do and how to be; I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top; Of the graduate school mountain, But there in the sandpile at Sunday school. These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life - Learn some and think some; And draw and paint and sing and dance; And play and work everyday some. Take a nap

every afternoon. When you go out into the world, Watch out for traffic, Hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder."

That's not ALL you need to know, but it supports what Jesus said about having a child-like spirit.

3. Don't stop learning something new every day!

Children have a natural sense of curiosity. If you spend time with a toddler, they'll ask you a million questions. Most of the questions contain "why." "Why is the sky blue?" "Why do I have to take a bath?" "Why do I have to eat my vegetables?" Children aren't shy about asking questions.

One mother tells the true story of sitting in a doctor's waiting room with her six-year-old son, Charlie. Charlie blurted out to the woman next to them, "Why is your tummy so big?" The expectant mother smiled patiently and said, "Because I'm having a baby." Charlie's eyes got as big as saucers and he asked, "So the baby is in your tummy?" The mother replied, "She sure is." Charlie asked, "Is she a good baby?" The expectant mom was thinking how cute Charlie was and said, "She sure is a good baby." Then Charlie asked, "Then why did you eat her?"

Children love to learn. They are like sponges soaking up information. They will even ask God funny questions. There are several collections of Children's prayers. Here are some questions kids ask God: Anita prayed, "Dear God, is it true my father won't get into heaven if he uses his golf words in the house?" Norma prayed, "Dear God, did you mean for giraffes to look like that or was it an accident?" Jeff asked God, "Dear God, it is great the way you always get the stars in the same place each night. Why can't you do that with the moon?" Dennis prayed, "Dear God, my Grandpa says you were around when he was a little boy. How far back to do you go?"

The problem with some adults is they lose that curious, child-like, teachable heart. They think they know it all. They close their minds to any new information.

The Apostle Peter compared us to children when he wrote, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation." (1 Peter 2:2) The same way a baby craves a bottle of formula, we should have a craving for the Word of God. We need to approach the Bible with an open mind and an intense hunger to learn. One of my dad's favorite bits of advice was, "Son, you learn something new everyday." I've found that to be true. So, don't ever stop learning.

4. Don't stop asking for help!

A child is totally dependent on others, so they have to ask for help. I was playing with my granddaughter, Caroline, not long ago and she said, "Deedee, will you tie my shoes?" Then she wanted to swing, so she said, "Will you push me in the swing?" In the video we confirmed that kids don't carry money and they can't drive themselves to school. They have to depend on their parents.

Dependence comes natural for a child. The older we get the more independent we become and we're even proud of it. We think we can take care of our own needs and our own problems. I've heard people say, "I'm too proud to ask for charity." Their attitude is wrong, but their observation is correct. It is pride that keeps a person from asking for help. Humility is recognizing that our own strength is not sufficient, so we have to beg God or other people for help. We need to be like a child and realize the very next breath we take is a gift from God. The next pulse of our heart is a gift from God. Every dollar we ever earn is because God has given us the ability to work. We must have that kind of complete dependence on God.

Remember when we studied Simon Peter walking on the water? When he started sinking, he was probably tempted to swim back to the boat: After all, he could do that in his own strength. But he was humble enough to ask for help. He cried out, "Lord, save me!" Pride will make you think you can swim to heaven on your own. But like a child, you should cry out to God for help.

5. Don't stop trusting completely!

In the video the kids were willing to jump off the steps into someone's arms. That's what faith is, taking a leap and trusting that God will be there for you. Trust comes naturally to a child, that's why we have to teach them not to speak to strangers—they are too trusting.

The world is full of scams and con men, so as we grow older we become more skeptical. We need to be skeptical about some of the things the world throws at us, but when it comes to our relationship with God we should have a simple, child-like faith. The opposite of trusting God is worry. Did you notice children don't worry about the things adults do? Kids aren't worried about the gridlock on Congress, or about rising gasoline prices.

In Matthew 6 Jesus commanded us not to worry. He said that our heavenly Father knows what we need, and He will take care of us. Jesus said, "Look at the birds, God takes care of them, and you are more precious than the birds, so don't worry!"

Kids don't worry about how they are going to cook breakfast. They believe mom or dad will prepare breakfast for them. That's the kind of trust God wants us to have in Him. He is Jehovah-Jireh, the God who provides.

Did you hear about the two birds that were observing the human race? "Said the robin to the sparrow, 'I'd really like to know; why these anxious human creatures rush about and worry so!' Said the sparrow to the robin, 'I think that it must be; That they have no Heavenly Father such as cares for you and me.'" God will take care of you. You can trust Him – completely!

6. Don't stop forgiving quickly!

Kids don't carry grudges; they forgive. Kids don't seek revenge; they forgive. When I was a kid, I was at church one day. We were playing softball, and I was pitching. The batter hit the ball, and since we didn't have a catcher, I ran to home plate to catch a throw to tag out a runner who was trying to score. My buddy, Paul, was heading for home at just the time the ball arrived and I tagged him as he ran into me. We didn't have an umpire, so I said, "You're out!" He said, "No, I

was safe!" That argument turned into a fistfight and soon we were rolling around on the ground. Our R.A. counselor, Mr. Willis, separated us and told us to shake hands and to tell each other we were sorry. We did that and the game continued. After the game, Paul and I grabbed a coke and sat next to each other during the R.A. lesson. Then we walked home, best friends again, with the fight completely forgotten.

Wouldn't the world be a better place if we could forgive people who have hurt us as easily as kids do?

Some boys were bragging one day on the playground about how their dads could beat up the other kids' dads. That afternoon a big, strong man rang the doorbell at the house of one of the boys. The dad answered the door and the big guy said, "My kid said that your kid said that you have a list of people you can beat up and that I'm on that list. I don't think you can beat me up, so what are you going to do about it?" The smaller dad said, "I'll take you off my list."

The problem with adults is that we keep a list of people that we haven't forgiven. Why don't you take those people off your list and forgive them? The Bible says, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32 NKJV)

7. Don't stop running into your father's arms!

When the parents tried to bring their kids to Jesus, the disciples said, "The Master is too busy for you." But Jesus rebuked the disciples and took the little children into His arms and blessed them. Jesus has His arms open for you today as well.

One of my greatest memories as a dad was when I would come home in the afternoon and my two daughters would come running up to me yelling, "Daddy! Daddy!" And then they would jump into my arms, and I'd pick them up and spend some time listening to them tell me about their day. If you grew up in a home where there were strong arms to hold you and protect you, you are blessed.

Kids need someone bigger and stronger than them to protect them. When we become adults, we still need someone bigger and stronger to take care of us and our Heavenly Father is available. We can run to Him and He will embrace us like a perfect Father. I'm not just making this up because it's a nice thought. The Bible says in Galatians 4:6 says, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who cries out, 'Abba! Father!'"

God is not some unapproachable alien force. He is a loving Father who wants you embrace you the way a father embraces his child.

CONCLUSION

In the King James version, Jesus says, Except you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3) Many of us had a conversion experience as a child. I was nine years old when I placed my faith in Jesus Christ. I was

converted as a child. But I think there are many adults who need to have another kind of conversion. You've got to stop trying to analyze everything about God and start simply trusting Him. Do you need to be converted?

It could be that the biggest change you need to make is to stop trying to figure out God and just start trusting Him. As an adult you may be waiting until you understand salvation before you accept it. You'll never understand it. You only have to accept God's free gift of eternal life. That's easy for a child to understand, but difficult for an adult.

God isn't looking for childish behavior, but He is looking for a child-like spirit. In a real sense, only children go to heaven—God's children.

I came across an interesting declaration that expresses what I've been talking about:

I am hereby officially tendering my resignation as an adult. I have decided I would like to accept the responsibilities of an 8-year-old again. I want to go to McDonald's and think that it's a four-star restaurant. I want to think M&Ms are better than money because I can eat them.

I want to return to a time when life was simple. When all I knew was colors, numbers, and nursery rhymes; but that didn't bother me, because I didn't know what I didn't know—and I didn't care. All I knew was to be happy—because I was blissfully unaware of all the things that should make me worried or upset.

I want to think the world is fair. That everyone is honest and good. I want to believe that anything is possible. I want to live simple again. I don't want my day to consist of computer crashes, mountains of paperwork, depressing news, how to survive more days in the month than there is money in the bank, doctor bills, gossip, illness, and loss of loved ones.

I want to believe in the power of smiles, hugs, a kind word, dreams, and unlimited imagination. So...Here's my smartphone, my car keys, my credit card bills, and my 401K statements. I am officially resigning from adulthood. And if you want to discuss this further, you'll have to catch me first, cause...“Tag! You're it!”

OUTLINE

To CHANGE and become like a child, don't stop:

1. Giggling with wonder!
2. Playing with your friends!
3. Learning something new every day!
4. Asking for help!
5. Trusting completely!
6. Forgiving quickly!
7. Running into your Father's arms!

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes