

CHILDISH THINGS THAT SHOULD NOT BE PUT AWAY

by

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1996

Theme: An important aspect of becoming an adult is to retain the simple lessons about life and relationships learned in childhood.

Theme Text: 1 Corinthians 13:11; Matthew 18:3; Luke 18:15-17

Presentation Notes: While adults will no doubt receive a blessing from this message, the target group are adolescents, young people on the verge of adulthood. Throughout the following outline, numbers in parentheses (1), (2), (3) will indicate illustrations from the section called *Sermon Illumination*. The addition of your personal illustrations will enhance the presentation.

In a world of change, diminishing family values, moral laxity, and increased numbers of single parents, our children's spiritual condition is at stake. It is therefore crucial for parents to devote their time and energy to building a foundation for their child's character. It is critical because a child's spiritual character will be molded no matter what. It will either be molded by Christian parents or it will be molded by the world. Character development *cannot* be left to chance.

Pastor, philosopher and author Robert Fulghum says that all he ever needed to know he learned in kindergarten.

These are the things I learned: Share everything. 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 every day 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. Remember the little seed in the styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that. Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the styrofoam cup—they all die. So do we. (*All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, 1988, pp. 4, 5)

As we become adults we would do well to remember the simple relationship lessons we learned as children. Fulghum goes on to say:

Think what a better world it would be if we all—the whole world—had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess. (pp. 5, 6).

Jesus said something similar about being childlike as adults: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth,

anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:16, 17).

No doubt at this stage in your lives you are much more attracted to the statement of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:11, "When I was child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me." How can both these texts be true? On the one hand, childlikeness is commended by Christ himself. On the other hand, Paul says childish things are to be put away. Is there a difference between the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of Paul? Or are both presenting truth?

Scripture Paradoxes

Scripture at times presents paradoxes such as: leave father and mother, yet honor father and mother; whosoever save his life shall lose it, but whosoever loses his life for my sake shall find it; the first shall be last and the last first; the greatest shall be a servant. The statements about childlikeness by Jesus and Paul present another paradox. Often in the study of such paradoxes we discover profound truth.

Growing Up

Students of child growth and development have charted the growth of children from pre-birth through adulthood. (1) You are on the far end of the transition between childhood and the full responsibilities of adult life. Much of the personal work you are engaged in has to do with separating yourself from your parents, becoming a unique individual, developing your own perspective on things, and your personal value system. (2)

You used to think as a child, to reason as a child. You grew through the time when your thinking wouldn't allow you to comprehend that a tall thin glass didn't hold more water than a short fat one. Your understanding of the world around you and its dilemmas was simplistic. Everything was either black or white, there were no shades of gray. Spiritually your faith was simple too. (3) But now you are putting away childish things. Adulthood looks so attractive, so exciting, you are anxious to put childhood behind you and get on with your life. You are in the midst of making some of the most important decisions you will ever make, decisions for a career, decisions about a life partner, decisions which will set the sails for your life.

You are processing your parent's religion at new levels. Your questions have changed from the "Where does God live and what does He look like?" of childhood to the "How do I know God really exists and do I really want Him in my life" questions of the emerging adult mind. If these are the kinds of questions in your mind today, you are exactly where you need to be as a young Christian adult. They are questions we adults have had to think about and make decisions about for ourselves, and we want to be there with you while you do your processing for whatever help our testimony can be. However, we cannot do the study or the thinking for you. This is part and parcel of the process of growing up.

Things That Should Not Be Put Away

In the fanaticism of the 1800's, as revival swept through America, one group interpreted the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:3 literally. They went about on all fours, imitating children and babbling. But Jesus is not speaking about the physical attributes of childhood. Jesus and Paul are both right. Childhood gives way to maturity, in physical, mental, and emotional development.

Moral reasoning also progresses. Spiritually we mature, yet our spirituality contains simple, childlike elements. Growing up does not necessarily mean growing away from the simple lessons learned in childhood. You are putting away immaturity for maturity, but part of that maturity is the maintenance of the uncomplicated, innocent aspects of childhood. Thus, when you are tempted

to throw away childish things like worn-out toys that are no longer interesting, consider putting a few of childhood's characteristics on the shelf for later.

1. Children love presents and receive them gladly. They don't scrutinize the gift and wonder about the shop it came from. They don't ask, "Did she get this on sale or pay full price for it?" And they are never burdened by the thought, now I must reciprocate. I'll have to give back something of similar value.

The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these because they receive it as a gift, because the Giver loves them and offers it to them freely. As you move through the challenges of adult life, you will likely be more and more tempted to think this is too simple, that there must be something you must do to be saved. But remember, the question of the Pharisees was always the wrong question. They always asked, "What must I do . . . ?" Jesus, however, came to address a different question, the most fundamental question of human existence, Who am I? God's answer to that question is that He put you in Christ and declared you thereby to be His Sons and Daughters. (4) You were crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20), you died with Him (Rom. 6:5-8), you were resurrected with Him and are now seated with Him in heavenly places (Eph. 2:5, 6). From the vantage point of this spiritual reality He now calls you—to walk as children of the light (Eph. 5:8), to walk worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in your lives (Col. 1:10), to become in the ordinary reality of everyday life all that He has declared you to be in Christ.

2. Children are spontaneous, acting at once on what they understand. Their impulses are not strangled by cautious calculations and skepticism. They have no defense mechanisms in place to protect themselves from embarrassment or to hide their shame. (5)

What changes your generation could bring into our churches if you could hold on to your openness and your vulnerability! If you could invite us all, by your example, to leave our masks at home and share openly with one another both our joys and our troubles. You could be the generation who leads the church into a new sense of community. We need you to help us enter into "one anothering" at the levels the early church understood about. It's too easy for adults to judge one another, envy one another, lie to one another, murmur against one another. Don't lose your ability to accept one another, confess your sins to one another, serve one another, bear one another's burdens, or build one another up. We need you to stay willing to spontaneously respond, whatever the truth may be. In many of our churches we need to have more spontaneity, more praise and expressions of delight in the Lord.

3. Children never stop asking questions. Adults often weary of children's questions: "Dad, what makes the sky blue?" "Do worms sleep at night?" "What makes toenails tougher than fingernails?" "When are we going to get there?" (6)

Your generation is full of questions. Questions that may make adults uncomfortable, frightened, sometimes even angry because they may seem to threaten the pillars of our faith. You're often not content with trite, common answers. You challenge our thinking. You press us into uncomfortable levels of thought about issues we would rather not address. However, this may be the best gift your youthfulness brings to the church. You may be the generation that keeps this Church a movement that refuses to settle down complacently with a list of fundamental beliefs that we can recite by rote. Studies show that such lists tend to lose some of their meaning as generations pass. They are less meaningful in your lives and will eventually be less important to your children to the extent that they are no longer fresh from the word of God. So, keep asking questions. God can communicate with questioning minds.

4. Children are trusting and dependent. At an early age, a child looks on the world with wondering and expectant eye, and lives in glad trust. Children whose trust has not been betrayed by abandonment, abuse or violence done toward them tend to continue to have a very confident trust in life. Children are not bothered by being dependent. When crises come, they do not

pretend to be self-sufficient. They turn to those they trust with simple faith that there will be a response.

Many of us as adults have grown jaded, suspicious, cynical. Like the Pharisees, we have turned to our own self-sufficiency as the only thing dependable in our world. However, the arrogant, proud and self-sufficient cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven. That is why the narrative about Jesus and the children, which is universally acclaimed to be one of the loveliest stories in the New Testament, is also in its implications one of the most challenging and disturbing. It was an invitation to children. It was also a rebuke to pride and self-righteousness.

It is important as you pass through this period in your life that you separate from us as your parents and become your own persons. This is absolutely necessary for the health of us both. But try never to lose your capacity to ask for help and to accept gestures of kindness in your times of need. Across life you will pass through seasons when you can minister to others and seasons when you will have a need for someone to minister to you. Remember, there is nothing wrong with needing the support of another, that's why God made us family. Learning how and when to rely appropriately on others makes understanding our reliance upon God easier. You could help us all pass through our self-sufficiency to a child-like faith, to a full and complete dependence on God's mercy.

5. Children love to play. For adults, life is too often a serious business with little or no time for play. A lot of us grew up with the notion that play is worthless, something you can't afford to do. But we like to think that Christ was playful, spontaneous, that He and His disciples dived into the water as they were walking beside the Sea of Galilee or the Jordan.

All too soon your lives will be encumbered with the burdens of adult life. You can't possibly imagine now all the curves and twists and hurdles life will bring. Some will be of your own making, others are such that you couldn't have done anything to prevent them. Through it all, take time to pray and to play. We need your generation to keep us from taking life so seriously that we forget to play, to enjoy, to celebrate the good things, even as we shoulder one another's burdens together. Jesus expressed his desire for his people when He said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it to the full" (John 10:10). A life fully lived is His legacy to His children.

Conclusion

Fulghum's thought is challenging. How much better the world would be if we approached it with the childlike simplicity, humility, trust and dependence of children, if we all had cookies and milk in the mid-afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap? If all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess. What if we all remembered, no matter how old we are—"when we go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together"?

In one way you are leaving childhood behind. In another way you have an opportunity to bring some of it along with you into adulthood. Let no one despise your childhood or your youth, it is a key to successful living as a Christian. "Except we become as little children, we cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Your childlikeness may yet be your best attribute and your best gift to us all.

Sermon Illumination

One (1): Growth from stage to stage may be somewhat different from child to child and dependent upon the child's environment, however, numerous developmental characteristics appear to be similar among children. While admitting that growth is wholistic, Berger (1994), for example, outlines biosocial, cognitive, and psychosocial development through the periods of prenatal, the first two years, the play years, the school years, adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood.

Two (2): Robert Havinghurst has outlined ten developmental tasks with which adolescents are involved:

- 1) Establishing mature relationships with peers of both sexes.
- 2) Establishing a mature sexual role.
- 3) Accepting one's own body.
- 4) Accepting emotional independence from parents.
- 5) Developing a plan for financial independence.
- 6) Investigating and preparing for a job or career.
- 7) Learning patterns for his or her personal family life.
- 8) Developing appropriate behavior and civil skills to take one's place as an adult member of society.
- 9) Developing social skills to discern appropriate behavior in various situations.
- 10) Developing a workable set of personally held values. (Cutler and Peace, 1990, pp. 28, 29)

Three (3): In another of his essays Robert Fulghum tells of hearing the Lord's prayer as a child and thinking it said, "Our Father who art in heaven, Howard be thy name." Since Howard was his mother's family name, he felt well connected, part of the family, and thus fully expected all his prayers to be answered.

Four (4): And the word that was spoken to Jesus at the Jordan, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," embraces humanity. God spoke to Jesus as our representative. With all our sins and weaknesses, we are not cast aside as worthless. "He hath made us accepted in the Beloved." . . . The voice which spoke to Jesus says to every believing soul, This is My beloved child, in whom I am well pleased. (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 113).

Five (5): I (Ron) once asked a child, "How old are you?" He gave me an instant answer. Holding up four fingers he replied, "I'm four," and with the same breath asked the question, "How old are you?" I didn't have enough fingers to hold up. When I replied, "I'm fifty," the child looked puzzled.

Six (6): For a year or more two little girls lived with their mother in the house next door to us. Because I (Ron) have a habit of periodically placing old, unwanted household items on the curb with a sign "Free" for the benefit of passers-by, these little girls learned to call me "Mister Free." When I would be working on my lawn or in my flower garden, they would look at me curiously and say, "What you doin' Mister Free?" I remember trying to explain fertilizer to them. "What's that?" they asked. "It's food for the grass," I replied. "But how does the grass eat it?" "The grass eats with its toes," I said. Seemingly satisfied, they went away with what must have been a most interesting report to their mother.

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