

“OH, SO PRECIOUS!”
MATTHEW 18:10-14

If you are looking in the Old Testament for an example of a Bible character who was known to be champion of children, you will be looking for a long time. I am not saying there were *not* Old Testament characters who were attentive and devoted to children. I am merely saying that we cannot find examples or stories of adults who consistently *lavished* children with affection, who continually gave them their *undivided* attention, or who habitually spent what we call “*quality time*” with them.

Some of you might be wondering if Abraham and Isaac’s father/son outing to Mount Moriah qualifies as “quality time.” But given what Abraham was instructed to do once he arrived, I rather doubt it.

The absence of Old Testament examples on this subject might lead one to conclude that being passionately devoted to children is not necessarily a virtue, that being intensely interested in children is not a noble endeavor, that expending one’s energies on behalf of children is not a divine priority, or that dedicating oneself to the welfare of children is not a worthwhile cause. Indeed, in first century Palestine, children *were* marginalized. Rabbis and religious leaders had precious little to say about children, and the Jewish community in general relegated them to the periphery.

But then Jesus came along and said and did some things that not only elevated children’s status in society but revealed just how precious they are to God. He identified certain childlike qualities that were so important that He said unless a person possesses those qualities, he/she cannot enter His kingdom. On one occasion, when parents were bringing their children to Jesus so that He could bless them, His disciples rebuked those parents either because they were annoyed, or they assumed Jesus would be annoyed at having to deal with a bunch of kids at close range. And Jesus said, “Not so fast! *Let those children come to me, and do not hinder them. For the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these*” (Matthew 19:14).

Clearly, Jesus valued children. He validated them, He affirmed them, He enjoyed them. So, it is not surprising that Jesus would make the following statement: **Verse 10.** *“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.*

Jesus is in the middle of a conversation that started when His disciples asked Him who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (18:1). Jesus responded with an object lesson. He called a little child that was standing nearby and had him stand in their midst. Mark’s Gospel tells us that He then took the boy into His arms. There is every reason to believe that Jesus was still holding this child when He said in **verse 10**, *“See that you do not despise one of these little ones.”* I believe Jesus was calling the disciples’ attention to the boy He was holding.

Jesus is continuing to reinforce the main theme of His instruction that began in response to the disciples’ question. Children are extremely precious to God! And because they are so valuable, their vulnerability demands that we treat them with utmost kindness and care. Of course, that starts with an attitude. Jesus specifically prohibits His followers from *despising* children. The word translated despise means to feel contempt for someone or something because it is thought to have little or no value.

Children in first century Palestine had very little status and esteem in the community. Because they were too weak, small, and undeveloped to fight in the army, or own a business,

or work in the fields, or store up wealth, or give advice, or reproduce, they counted for very little. And they were treated accordingly, oftentimes with contempt.

But Jesus says, "That attitude is totally inappropriate given what God thinks and how God feels about these children. They are precious to Him, so precious that, **verse 10b**, *in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven*.

This is a fascinating statement, and it raises all kinds of questions and opportunities for conjecture. It seems that Jesus is asserting that children are represented by angels in heaven, and possibly that every child is represented by an angel in heaven. Having lived in heaven prior to coming to earth, being the Lord of heaven, being the Creator of both angels and human beings, Jesus certainly knew what He was talking about here. He had witnessed this heavenly scene with His own eyes. He knew the precise role of angels in relationship to humanity, He knew the interaction that goes on in heaven between the angels and His Father.

However, His brief statement and descriptions in verse 10 reveal very little about these things. I think it is possible to conclude that children are represented by angels in heaven, for Jesus refers to these angels as "their" angels, and that possessive pronoun points back to "these little ones". We can also say for sure that these angels have continual access to God, for Jesus says that they always see the face of His Father in heaven.

Are these guardian angels? Possibly. Does every child have a guardian angel? Possibly, but we cannot be absolutely sure. Is every single person represented by an angel, or just children? Again, we cannot be sure. So, building a theology of guardian angels on this passage, though intriguing, is problematic, for there is simply not enough information to draw any hard and fast conclusions. Suffice it to say, angels are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (Heb. 1:14), which means that they have a role in the affairs of Jesus' followers, a role that is likely more significant than any of us knows. But we cannot be certain just exactly what that role is.

However, we must not forget that the point of Jesus' statement in verse 10 is not to satisfy our curiosity about angels, but to emphasize how valuable children are to God. So valuable are they that He has designated angels to represent them in His presence. And that reveals how valuable children are to God because their angels get to continually see His Father's face, which is to say that they are positioned in *the* most privileged place in the entire universe, the place of *greatest* honor. It stands to reason, then, that if these angels are representing *these children* in that place of privilege and honor, these children *must* be extremely precious to God.

And that is why we should never despise children. We should never treat them with contempt, or exploit their vulnerabilities, or dismiss them as unimportant, or marginalize them, or cause them to stumble, or relegate them to the periphery of community life. Since children are extremely precious to God, they ought to be extremely precious to us. So, we should esteem them, honor them, cherish them, and treat them with respect and dignity. We should bend over backwards to ensure their safety, security, protection, well-being, and survival.

That is what Jesus describes next. Look at **verses 12-13**. ***12** 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? **13** And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.*

First, you need to know that this is one of two similar, yet separate stories in the Gospels about a shepherd caring for a flock of one hundred sheep and one sheep of that

flock going astray, causing the shepherd to leave the ninety-nine and search for the one. The other story is found in Luke 15. On that occasion Jesus was not speaking to His disciples but to Pharisees and scribes, and the subject was not the value of every child but the value of every sinner.

It is important to distinguish between the meanings of these two similar stories, because they have completely different applications. In Matthew's story, Jesus is reinforcing his assertion that *every single child* is precious to God. You might have noticed in verse 10 that Jesus specifically and intentionally said, **verse 10**, ¹⁰ *"See that you do not despise one of these little ones."* The implication? "Every single child is precious! Every child belongs to me! I masterfully created and designed each one of them!" To borrow the words of David, "I formed every child's inward parts; I knit every child together in its mother's womb. Every child is fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psa. 139:13-14).

So, when Jesus describes a scenario where one sheep has gone astray, He phrases His words so that they appeal to the disciples' sensibilities about shepherds. A shepherd is devoted to every single one of His sheep, and so even if just one of His one hundred sheep strays, the shepherd, because of His love for and commitment to every single sheep, drops everything and goes after it. The shepherd doesn't say, "Oh well, it's only one. No big deal. I cannot risk leaving the ninety-nine others to go after it. I'll just have to write it off as a business loss."

No, because every single sheep is precious to him, he immediately goes into rescue mode when one gets lost. He concentrates all of his energy and effort toward finding it. In fact, the verb translated "seek" or "search for" is in a tense that describes continuous action. He *continuously* looks or *keeps on* searching for the lost sheep until he finds it.

And when he finds it, he is overcome with joy. The climax of the story *is* the joy that results from finding the lost sheep that even exceeds the joy of knowing that ninety-nine are safe. That does not mean the shepherd is not happy about the ninety-nine. He is simply emphasizing that there is intense joy over bringing one that was lost safely back into the fold. That lost one was precious, and had it remained lost it would have caused enormous grief. The joy of finding it is intensified in knowing that the shepherd is spared the heartache.

That is what Jesus means in **verse 14** as He interprets the meaning of the parable. ¹⁴ *So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (ESV).*

Once again, notice the emphasis on the individual child. The Father is not willing that any of these little ones perish—not even one. Jesus is yet again asserting that every single child is precious to God, so precious that He does not want any of them to perish, and He will go to great lengths to see that they don't.

I want to be careful not to read too much into verse 14 because there is not enough information in it to build an airtight theology about the salvation of children. But given what Jesus has communicated about the value of every child, the Father's love for every child, and the Father's will that no child should perish, I think it is reasonable to conclude that children who die before they reach an age of accountability (whatever that age might be) will go to heaven and will not perish in hell (I believe the word "perish" in verse 14 refers to eternal separation from God).

There are other passages that lend support to this view, though none of them are explicit. So, one's view on this subject is based on theological reasoning rather than on clear statements in Scripture. Which is to say, it is a conviction, not an absolute. For me it is a strong conviction, but I cannot be *absolutely* sure it is true.

However, we can be very sure about the meaning and application of verses 10-14. I want to mention two things, the first of which has to do with our *attitudes* toward children. Since every child is extremely precious to God, every child *ought* to be extremely precious to us.

May I remind you that God is in the process of conforming every one of his children into the image of Christ? That means, in part, that if we are letting Him have His way in us, we are being progressively aligned with His thoughts, His desires, and His will. Paul boldly declared to the Corinthians that “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). That means we are capable of having God’s perspective and God’s attitude about children. Which means that children ought to be extremely precious to every Christ follower.

Yet I have seen quite a few professing Christians who seem like they couldn’t care less about kids, who seem uninterested in kids, who marginalize kids, or who treat kids like they’re a nuisance. I would submit to you, that attitude is incompatible with being a Christ follower. Jesus said, “*See that you do not despise one of these little ones.*” That is a negative way of saying, we should *esteem* every little one. We should honor them, cherish them, and respect them.

I am not sure there is any way to do this *other* than by being intentional about being with children, getting to know children, cultivating meaningful relationships with children, and communicating with children on their level about things they are interested in. And I am not sure there is a better way to do this than by getting down on their level and looking them in the eyes, learning their names (and calling them by name), asking them questions, listening to their answers, and having a real, two-way conversation.

I have intentionally practiced doing this for several years, and I would submit to you that it has accomplished at least two things: first, I genuinely love children and my love for children is intensifying the older I get—not just for my grandchildren, whom I adore, but for the children in our church, whom I also adore. For children in Africa whom I have gotten to know over the years. My love for children, my desire to interact with children, my concern for children’s spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being keeps getting deeper and growing stronger. And I think that is God conforming me to the image of Christ.

Second, most children I am around know that I love them and that I am genuinely interested in them, and so they love me back. By the way, kids know if an adult is genuine or not. It is much harder to fool a child with fake love than it is an adult. Children can spot a phony a mile away, and if someone pretends to love them but really doesn’t, they know it, and usually won’t give him/her the time of day.

My favorite thing about being a pastor is getting handmade cards and letters from kids in our church; having kids come up to the front before or after the service just to chat with me; having kids say, “Guess what Pastor Stan? I asked Jesus in my heart this week!” getting text messages, like I did this week from kids in Kenya who said, “Have a blessed New Year grandpa. We love you very much and wish you and your family a great day!”

I have found in almost forty years of being a pastor that the love of children is probably the most encouraging thing for me personally, because their love is pure, constant, unconditional, and enduring. I have discovered over the years that the love of some adults goes up or down based on how I preach or how I perform—whether or not it is to their liking. But kids don’t do that...ever! And I think that is one of the reasons they are so precious to God.

There is another practical application from this passage that is essential. Since every child is extremely precious to God, we ought to devote ourselves to promoting, preserving,

and protecting them at whatever cost.

Moms and dads, your most important work in this world is raising your children. You have been entrusted with the stewardship of eternal souls who will either populate heaven or hell. Don't let anything prevent you from making your children your top priority.

Those of you who work with children in our church, may God bless you! You are doing some of the most important work in our ministry. And please don't think for a second that just because you are teaching children and not adults that somehow you are a second-rate teacher. Your teaching is every bit as important and may be the most fruitful. Those of you who work in the nursery or in Awana or in the After School program, please don't think that it goes unnoticed by God. He is pleased, because the children you work with are precious to him. Jane and Donna, your investment in children through the Christmas program every year is an eternally consequential endeavor.

Those of you who have adopted children or those of you who have cared for foster children, please know that you have applied Jesus' words in Matthew 18 in the most excellent manner, and I believe your reward in heaven is great. Thank you for your example to the rest of us what it means to be a champion of children.

I want to close by asking you to consider this: You can tell a lot about a person by the way they speak to children, treat children, relate to children, and invest in children. Those who are passionately devoted to children, who are intensely interested in children, who expend their energies on behalf of children, and who dedicate themselves to the welfare of children are men and women after God's own heart. May that be true of all of us, for God's sake, and for sake of the children who are precious to Him.

Oh, So Precious!
Matthew 18:10-14

Main Idea: *Since every child is extremely precious to God, every child ought to be precious to us*

The extraordinary value of every child (10-14)
No child should ever be despised (10a)

Every child is represented by an angel in heaven (10b)
Angels who are ministering spirits (Heb. 1:14)

Angels who get to continually see God's face

God does not want any children to perish (12-14)
Story of a shepherd's love for every sheep (12-13)
If one wanders, He will leave the flock to go after it

When He finds it He will greatly rejoice

Statement re: God's attitude toward children (14)
He is not willing that any child perish (explicit)

He values every single child (implicit)

The application
Regarding our attitudes toward children

Regarding our treatment of children