

ACT LIKE A CHILD

TAKE A CUE FROM THE
KIDS AND BE SMALL AT HEART.

BY LEE ECLOV

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CHECK YOUR crèche. Or, look outside a church that has one of those weather-weary manger scenes. No children, right? Not unless someone squeezed in a shepherd boy. But in the official Bible stories, there are no kids at all. Except the infant Jesus.

Most of the time at our Christmas pageants, we turn children into adults because, well, Christmas



is especially for children. So we cast pint-sized magi, wee shepherds, and a miniature Mary and Joseph while parents watch proudly. Even mighty angels are scrunched down to the height of a yardstick.

Here's the paradox: At Christmas, we costume children as adults even though Jesus was born to turn big people into little ones. Jesus told His too-big-for-their-britches disciples, "I assure you, ... unless you are converted [unless you change; turn] and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).

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Jesus often referred to His adult disciples as "little children." To Jesus, all church should be children's church.

Did you ever take your kids or grandkids to a park with those huge playground structures? Ladders and slides, tunnels and turrets, passages and swinging bridges and hidey-holes. It's great for little kids, but big people bruise their heads and get stuck. God's kingdom is like that, starting with the narrow gate.

Becoming like little children begins with being born again through Christ. No one can do that on his own! But as anyone with any church experience can tell you, being born again doesn't automatically guarantee Christians "become like children." It was a lot easier to be small at heart when we were 8 years old. Now, it requires tough spiritual work.

Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with an ego reduction plan called the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12). The Beatitudes (the Blessings) don't describe eight different kinds of people. They describe different characteristics of the born-again person — of spiritual "little children."

"The poor in spirit" acknowledge their heart's empty pockets when coming to the King. "Those who mourn" grieve over their sin and need. "The gentle" meekly refuse to power up in relationships. "Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" are tired of the sugar high of pride and the soul-killing saltwater of disobedience to God. "The merciful" let go of self-righteous judging. "The pure in heart" sweep and scour out the built-up grime in their heart's secret places. "The peacemakers" lay down their wounding words and approach stormy relationships with a white flag. "Those who are persecuted for righteousness" welcome the honor of sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Obviously, it is no little thing to get small! We may be born again in a heartbeat, but we grow

small slowly and imperceptibly, just as once we grew up. We constantly struggle with our inclination to puff up, to pretend we are big and more important than others.

There is no particular virtue in any of the qualities Jesus calls for. They are simple honesty before God. We are poor in spirit, for example.

The tough part is saying so. We deserve no praise for these things, yet each brings God's presence and a blessing: the kingdom of heaven, comfort, inheriting the earth, fulfillment, mercy, seeing God, and being called the sons of God (Matt. 5:3-12). Jesus took little children up onto His lap and blessed them. When we become like little children in Jesus' lap, those are the blessings the Lord gives us!

In the scenes from the Christmas story, there are actually more children than meet the eye. Mary accepted the angel's message: "I am the Lord's slave," said Mary. "May it be done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Joseph rose from his dream to humbly obey God and take Mary as his wife. Shepherds were invited to Jesus' manger because they were small enough to enter the kingdom's lowly throne room. And the magi, bringing their lavish treasures, fell to their knees and worshiped Jesus. Every one of them, little children.

So, in ways we may not have ever considered, having children take the roles of worshipers at Jesus' birth may be perfect casting. When you see a pint-sized wise man or a wide-eyed 3-year-old wearing cute little lamb ears, it would be good to think, *When I grow up, I want to be little like you.* ☺

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WHEN I GROW UP, I WANT TO BE LITTLE LIKE YOU.