Chapter 7
Be Like Little Children

Anyone who becomes as humble as this little child
is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 18:4 NLT)
—Jesus

Ruben and Rachel were only seven years old. The twins had been following Jesus, wide-eyed with wonder, from the moment he arrived in their little town in Galilee. After seeing one miraculous healing they stuck to Jesus like glue. They had to sneak away from their parents to follow this amazing man all through their little town.

It was the Sabbath Day and a large crowd of people surrounded Jesus. In the group were his disciples and a few Pharisees. The twins elbowed their way through the throngs of people and made it to the front just in time to hear Jesus say, "Stretch out your hand!" to a man with a withered hand. When the man stretched out his hand, it was healed! Gasps and exclamations erupted from the crowd of onlookers.

"Wow!" cried Ruben. "Look what Jesus did!"

The kids had never seen anything like it. Right before their eyes, people were being healed.

On another day, they saw Jesus feed thousands of people from a little boy's lunch.

"Did you see all those leftover baskets of bread?" shouted Rachel, full of wonder. "That's totally amazing! What's he going to do next?"

Awestruck, Ruben and Rachel wanted nothing more than to be close to Jesus, to give him their full attention and soak up every moment.

Of course, the story of Ruben and Rachel is fictional, but Jesus said the kingdom of heaven belonged to children like Ruben and Rachel:

> Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these (Matt 19:14).
> 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 (Matt 18:3-4).

The "kingdom of heaven" is not reserved for the "afterlife;" it is here right now. It intersects this earthly realm and we can receive the blessings of heaven and be conduits of those blessings today. Yet there is a catch, to do so, we must be like humble children.

Children are Full of Expectation

Unlike the twins I've never seen Jesus in person. But I have seen him heal people many times—not just from inner pain, but also from physical ailments that disappeared. However, I've also experienced a lot of disappointment—unanswered prayers, shattered dreams, and the daily grind of living in a world that is tainted with evil. After years of attending church it's easy to come to worship with a low expectation of *really* seeing Jesus. I've heard the Bible stories and I've seen the power of God many times, but expecting Jesus to do miraculous things today is still difficult. Keeping that childlike optimism is hard.

It takes dogged determination to keep returning to the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:9, 10). In this, the only prayer Jesus specifically instructed his disciples to pray, Jesus tells us to pray that his rule and reign would come right now. How can we, as worldly-wise adults, embrace such unbridled expectation?

The Kingdom is Near!

Ruben and Rachel would have heard Jesus say: "The kingdom is near you!" They saw the *demonstration* of this kingdom power by the multiplying of the fish and loaves to feed the hungry. The message was clear: the in-breaking power of the kingdom to heal, save and deliver is within our reach.

How can we re-gain this childlike expectation that Jesus' kingdom is here? One way to stir up our faith is to meditate on the historical reality of God's wonder working power in the Bible and in church history. To really see Jesus, just check out the undiluted kingdom of God in the gospels and the book of Acts. At Pentecost, the people were filled with faith and a pervasive spirit of worship: "Everyone was *filled with awe*, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles" (Acts 2:43, emphasis added).

Here is a principle we see repeated numerous times in church history—a renewal of worship is accompanied by an outpouring of God's Spirit for healing and salvation. A few examples are the 16th century with Martin Luther, the Wesleyan revival of the 1800's, and the early 1900's in the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles. In all these cases, dynamic worship in song was accompanied by outpourings of the Holy Spirit to empower and renew God's people.

We can increase our childlike expectancy of God's visitation by revisiting these chapters in church history in which worship was thriving and the Holy Spirit was moving powerfully. One such outpouring of God's Spirit in recent times came to the Anaheim Vineyard in the 1970's and 80's.

Todd Hunter, now a bishop in the Rwandan Diocese of the Anglican Church, is a former Vineyard church planter. Hunter speaks first on the distinctive quality of the early worship of the Anaheim Vineyard.[1]

> For 25 years I've traveled all over the world; I've participated in worship services, conferences, seminars, retreats and just about every other setting in which Christian worship takes place. In my judgment, the worship in the early era of Calvary Chapel/Vineyard Yorba Linda stands out way above the rest—it is of a completely different nature.

Hunter says that the three distinguishing characteristics of early Vineyard worship were: intimacy with God, the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit, and a culture of expecting God to visit his church powerfully in every time of worship.

He describes the congregation's desire for intimacy and eager anticipation as it looked forward to worshiping together:

> We literally could not wait to get to church; to be in the congregation, to worship, to see what God would do today, etc. We felt anticipation and we had legitimate hope that God would visit us in worship because he was consistent in doing so.[2]

> Many people walked into worship services for the first time and were caught up into the cycle and the atmosphere it created without ever giving it a conscious thought, except in hindsight: "what just happened to me; why do I feel so loved and so full of love, so close to God, so willing to pour out my heart to God in worship, to serve others … ?

Todd explains that it wasn't about the music; it was all about knowing God: "I don't ever remember anyone walking out of the gym and remarking about the band, the great guitar licks, the cool piano chops or the amazing vocal performances. It was all about feeling and knowing the presence of God and responding to him in worship."

We can't recreate past moments in history. In His sovereignty, God moves one way in one season, and then he moves another way. Yet the truth of Jesus' words are still real today: "the kingdom is near you" (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7). With God's help, we can see what Jesus saw: "To Jesus' eyes this is a God-bathed and God-permeated world. It is a world filled with a glorious reality, where every component is within the range of God's direct knowledge and control."[3]

Jesus-style worship means to invite the blessings of heaven to bring change today. We can start with the push-to-the-front-row kind of eagerness we see in Ruben and Rachel.

The Spirit of Adventure

I have a 10-year old son named Ian. Ian loves adventure, whether he gets it through books, movies or action characters. But he doesn't just want to read about something that happened once a long time ago. He wants to enter into the story and become one of the characters. So he goes into the backyard with his friend and they act out the roles of their heroes, even quoting lines from the movies as they fight. It's not a story anymore; it's real life. They don't care how they look. They just go for it.

This is what childlike faith can do. We enter into the acts of Jesus, so it's not just a story from long ago. We throw caution to the wind and reach out our hand to pray for someone or speak to someone. In kingdom activity, we learn by doing. If childlike faith wins out over adult constraint, we might just do something Jesus-like. It's not about whether we're going to win or lose. It's about doing what our hero does. We jump in the pool with both feet and learn to swim.

In the sixth chapter of John we see a boy who took a leap of faith. When five thousand hungry people were gathered to listen to Jesus teach, and it was time for lunch, there was only one young boy who had brought his lunch. Peter's brother, Andrew said, "There's a young boy here with five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that with this huge crowd?" (John 6:9 NLT).

I'm not the most generous person in the world; I'm still learning, but I find the idea of sharing my lunch a little troubling. If I pack my lunch for a picnic, I want to *eat my own lunch*. When it's lunchtime, I'm *hungry!* Why should I share my food with anyone else? They could have planned ahead and brought some food, but they didn't. Why should I rescue them? But this little boy just gave it away, despite whatever doubts were in his mind or whatever criticism and taunts were coming from his friends.

I'm guessing this was the first time this boy was asked to share his lunch with five thousand people. It was a brand new challenge, a brand new step. This little boy didn't have to understand everything going on in this mob scene of hungry people before he was willing to participate. Someone asked for help, and he gave it. Childlike faith won the day. He didn't reason his way out of an act of generosity.

If we need to figure everything out before we'll take a step of faith, we won't get very far. If our priority is self-protection and self-preservation, we won't give much at all. But look what happened when this little boy took a step of faith. He took a risk and five thousand hungry people were fed. That's pretty good fruit for one little boy.

Do the Obvious

One advantage that Ruben and Rachel had over us is that following Jesus was by far the most exciting thing in town. Today we live in an age of computer games, television and I-pods. We're pulled away from hungering for God by a thousand different things.

I recently participated in a weekend worship conference in Australia called "Building a Tabernacle." The imagery is taken from the Old Testament Tabernacle, which was a place for God to dwell, a place to meet with God. During the weekend, we spent a lot of time worshipping; that was the main priority. We taught from the Bible, but the first priority was to exalt God through singing and meditating on Him, and to open our hearts to his Spirit and voice.

This is a simple, childlike act—setting aside many hours over a few days to sing songs of love and adoration to God. Many people were greatly refreshed by this time. In one worship time, God profoundly touched me with a sense of His royal majesty. Once again He gave me an other-worldly experience of sensing his holiness and transcendence as King of Kings.

To walk in childlike humility, we must set aside time to be with him and worship Him. The spiritual discipline of worship requires a submissive surrendering of our agenda to adore God, to let the reality of God sink deeply into our souls. We need give him our full attention, to drop everything to do what Rachel and Ruben did; behold the Master's ways and works. This is the humble pathway to experiencing the wonders of his kingdom in the here and now.

My daughter Jessica isn't a child anymore—she's 18 years old and quickly becoming an adult. I recently bought a book for her called "The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism" by Tim Keller. She couldn't put it down. Not only did she immerse herself in the book but she found Keller's website and downloaded dozens of his sermons on podcasts. The other day she devoured three of his messages in half a day.

Later in the summer she took a week-long Christian worldview course. Everyday she came home bursting with excitement about what she had learned. Her hunger for truth, and her less busy summertime schedule allowed her to be filled with truth, to sit at the feet of Jesus and soak in his word. There was space in her life, and she chose to fill it with Jesus instead of constant entertainment. Childlike behavior doesn't have to stop when the toys get packed away in the attic.

Children Know They Have a Lot to Learn

When the disciples asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matt 18:1). Jesus said they needed to *change* and become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven. The world pushes us towards being the "greatest" but Jesus says, "humble yourself" like a child.

One of the definitions of "humble" is *unpretentious*. Kids know they have a low rank in the hierarchy of power, even within their own families. They know they have a lot to learn (though sometimes they'll never admit it). Most of the time little children know that they need their parents. They might love sword fighting or dressing up, but they also gravitate to the safety of their mom or dad's lap. When pain hits they gravitate to the source of their comfort and love. As adults we learn to respond in more sophisticated ways, losing out in the process.

Kids will ask for clarification when they are unsure what something means, and while we believe that we are done with being educated, the time that kids spend at school often

leads them to be better suited to learning more about the nature and character of Jesus. Our minds can be closed while theirs remain wide open.

In the book of Romans, right after Paul tells us how to live a life of worship, he says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought … " (Rom 12:3). When you're seven years old and only four feet tall, you know you're not the king of the mountain. When you're six feet tall, it's harder to admit you have a lot to learn.

Imagine Ruben and Rachel and their parents listening intently to Jesus teach a lesson that would become perhaps his most famous sermon. A huge crowd had gathered, so Jesus hiked up the hillside with his closest followers. Further down the hill, the twins strained to hear every word, pick up every nuance.

> God blesses those who are poor and *realize their need for him*, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs … God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted … God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth." (Matt 5:3-5 NLT, emphasis added).

After this lesson, the seven year olds would have asked their parents many questions. I hope that their parents would have filled in any gaps in their understanding, making clear that childlike dependence on God is the kingdom way, no matter how old you are. I hope that they grew up to know that feeling a need for God means we are "blessed" and that being "blessed" means so much more than just being "happy." A blessed person is one who is to be envied and emulated. It's a term of congratulation and recommendation. If you do these things, you are to be congratulated. In the short term, you may not see great visible rewards, but you will win in the long run. You will have a rich relationship with God.

This short teaching alone contains a wealth of insight into being a follower of Jesus. After over three decades of following Jesus, this simple truth still astounds me and calls me to a healthy self-examination. God never wants me to be self-sufficient. I can only find his blessing if I realize my need for Him. Self-sufficiency leads to being full of myself instead of being full of Him.

Little Children Don't Hide Their Feelings

I love the uninhibited freedom of a toddler. They make the funniest noises, say the funniest things, and they have no idea that it looks silly. When my daughter Elizabeth was younger, she would start dancing as soon as I put a CD on the stereo. Her two-year old version of break dancing was hilarious to watch, but in her mind she had all the right moves. She also "danced" in her chair while eating without a shred of embarrassment.

Dallas Willard explains how we learn in adulthood to hide our true feelings: "Interestingly, "growing up" is largely a matter of learning to hide our spirit behind our face, eyes, and language, so that we can evade and manage others to achieve what we

want and avoid what we fear. By contrast, the child's face is a constant epiphany because it doesn't yet know how to hide feelings."[4]

As adults, we often don't want people to know what we're thinking, and we never want to look silly. We want to fit in and be respected; after all, we have a reputation to protect. Admittedly there is a time for everything—including a time to keep our thoughts to ourselves—but there is also a time to be honest with our friends and with God. Childlike humility will free us from a prison of self-protection so we can open up: to laugh, to cry, to tell someone our biggest dreams, or to confess our sin and be healed.

Some attitudes *repel* God's presence, like pride and unbelief. Other attitudes *invite* God's presence and activity in our hearts, like humility and faith. May God give us faith like a child to believe that He exists, that His kingdom is all around us, and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him. May we throw unbelief to the wind and choose to believe that He actually is Almighty God; he can do the same things today that he did in the first century and in the revivals of the centuries past. May we expect him to act like God in us, bringing his kingdom to earth through us.

[1] Cindy Rethmeier, "An interview with Todd Hunter.) 2008
[2] Ibid
[3] Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 61.
[4] Ibid., 76