



God's heart for children

In all our work with children and all our thinking about children, we must understand God's heart for children and seek to have that same heart ourselves.

The heart of a child

Paradoxically, the first aspect of the divine heart for children is the heart of a child. In Matthew 18:1 the concern of the disciples is clear: *'At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"'* If we compare this with the other Gospels, we discover that they had been arguing about who was the greatest. Was it Peter, James or John? That pride and selfish ambition was destructive. How did Jesus answer them?

'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.' (NIV)

Jesus said they had to change, to turn around, and become like a child. But not like any child. Like this child. What was so special about this child? This child had heard Jesus call, had turned from what she was doing and had come to Jesus to see what he wanted. She viewed herself not as a master, but as a servant.

This is the *'divine humility'*. This is the humility of Jesus himself, *'who being in very nature God ... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant ... he humbled himself'* (Philippians 2:6-8, NIV). We need to seek this true humility and trust for ourselves. An old Dutch hymn puts it like this:

*Make me, O Lord, a child again,
So tender, frail and small,
In self possessing nothing, and
In you possessing all.
O Saviour, make me small once more,
That downward I may grow,
And in this heart of mine restore
The faith of long ago.
Make me, O Lord, a child again,
Obedient to your call,
In self possessing nothing, and
In you possessing all.*

We must become like children to teach children. Just as Jesus became like us to teach us.

The heart of a King

In Matthew 18:6 Jesus speaks about the utter evil of harming children: *"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"* (NIV).

Jesus recognises the reality of evil. This is a fallen world. And evil comes from within the human heart:

"For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly."

(Mark 7:21-22, NIV)

He also speaks of the utter wickedness of harming a child. In the Matthew 18 passage he is speaking particularly about a child who believes in him, but of course his interest extends to all children.

He is speaking about making children stumble, tripping them up, making them sin. Jesus is concerned about any harm coming to children. He says that it would be better to die a horrible death than to harm a child. He speaks in the righteous anger of the King who hates to see the most vulnerable of his subjects hurt.

There is a tendency for us to view someone who harms children as some sort of monster. But remember Jesus is here talking about any harm, particularly spiritual harm. Which one of us is guiltless?

Radical change is required of us.

"And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell."

(Matthew 18:9, NIV)

Jesus is here using the figure of speech hyperbole (exaggeration) to emphasise how radical the spiritual surgery must be to deal with our sin.

But he also speaks as the King, the Judge, who will one day consign to hell all those who have perpetrated evil and not come to him for the necessary surgery.

A Father's Heart

In Matthew 18:10 Jesus tells us: *'Do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven'* (NIV). God has a father's heart for children.

There is a crisis in fatherhood in our nation. The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police says that most of the crime in London is committed by young people under the age of 18 and the vast majority of them are boys with no father at home. Also a national survey found that having a father who rarely or never joined in their son's leisure activities at the age of 12 doubled the risk of the boy's juvenile conviction. There are similar statistics regarding girls who are sexually promiscuous.

That doesn't mean that all single mothers or stepfathers are failures — many are struggling in extremely difficult circumstances. And it also doesn't mean that the presence of a father is all that is required — he could be abusive or cruel. But as a society we have to face up to the fact that there is something far wrong in our concept of the family and of fatherhood in particular. The concept is largely absent and the father is often absent.

Could it be because we have lost the concept of the fatherhood of God? I think that is undoubtedly the case. At the very heart of the good news is a Father-Son relationship, yet people have become utterly ignorant of that. The gospel is largely excluded from local authority schools. And the Churches have failed in their God-appointed task to communicate the gospel. By and large the churches have lost the gospel — and those of us who have the gospel have so successfully insulated ourselves from the world that our message has no impact.

Generations of parents have failed to communicate to their children the marvels of that Father-Son relationship — and particularly fathers have failed.

Children need fathers. We hear a lot about the rights of the child. One of the most fundamental rights of the child is to have a father as well as a mother. We have made it so easy for fathers to abandon their children. We have now even allowed the adoption of children by two men or two women living together, totally ignoring the fundamental right of a child to have a father and a mother.

Fatherhood is central to the universe. "Father" is Jesus' usual name for God. There is a Fatherhood of God to the whole universe. He created it. He is the Father of lights, the giver of every good and perfect gift.

There is a Fatherhood of God to his people. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father".

And there is a unique Fatherhood of God the Father to God the Son. Fatherhood is central to the very being of God. Jesus even uses the intimate word, Abba, when addressing his Father. Our nearest equivalent to Abba is Daddy.

Here we must remind ourselves that God did not pick illustrations from his creation as approximations to help us understand what he is like — as if the idea of God being Father is just a figure of speech. Fatherhood exists in the world, because it existed first in God, not the other way round.

So there is a need for the Church to teach and to model fatherhood. We must do it for families, but we must do it also for all our activities with young people. Too often we have thought of Sunday School teaching and other youth activities as the domain of women and perhaps young people. There is a need for men who are fathers to be involved. Men must begin to take responsibility. We say we don't have time, and that's a big problem in our modern pressurized world. But what do we have time for? If we can make time for that, why not this?

All who work with children need to understand fatherhood. What is the kind of fatherhood we need? It is not any worldly concept of fatherhood. It is the fatherhood that is modelled on God.

He is loving, and we see his love in various ways. He is friendly — we need a fatherhood that is friendly and kind, not distant or harsh. He is faithful — we are called to be consistent and committed. He is fair — fathers need to be just and fair in all their dealings with their children. He is fun — God delights in the company of his children and so should we. He is forgiving — everyone who deals with children must have the forgiving heart of the Prodigal's father.

In addition to the Father being loving, there is also his being present. He is present with us, he is available to us — by his word and Spirit. We have instant access to his throne of grace. No matter how good our concept of loving fatherhood, unless we are actually present, it's little use to our children.

The Father also provides: *'If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!'* (Matthew 7:11, NIV). God gives his children everything they need, not everything they want! Someone has said, "We can be so busy giving our children what we didn't have, that we don't have time to give them what we did have." Material things are no substitute for spiritual counsel and support.

The Father protects. We live in a dangerous world. Dangerous spiritually as well as physically. In addition to being conscious at all times of the need to provide protection for the children under our care, we need to pray the father's prayer of Bob Dylan, *'But until men lose their chains, and righteousness reigns, Lord, protect my child.'*

The Father disciplines. Fatherhood implies authority. God disciplines his children. Today discipline has become equated with something harsh. But that is not the discipline the Bible speaks of. God disciplines his children because he loves them. Many of us had such a respect for our fathers, just a stern word from them was enough. True fatherhood has that kind of authority and respect.

The Father is patient. The old proverb goes, *"Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can it's seldom found in women and never in a man!"* Men can be impatient with their children and quick to anger over things that are ultimately not important. We ought to have the kind of patience that is slow to anger, like our heavenly Father. We ought also to have the patience of perseverance. The father of the Prodigal Son never gave up. He was still waiting for him when he saw him a long way off.

A shepherd's heart

God has a shepherd's heart for children. *"If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that*

wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matthew 18:12-14, NIV).

God's heart for children is the heart of the shepherd for the lost. He is not willing that even one should be lost. Is that the priority of his Church? We need to search for the lost. When a child is lost physically, a great search takes place, often involving hundreds of people. But we are surrounded by thousands of spiritually lost children. Who will search for them? Our heavenly Father doesn't want them lost. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.

*But none of the ransomed ever knew
how deep were the waters crossed,
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through,
ere he found his sheep that was lost.
Out in the desert he heard its cry,
Sick and helpless and ready to die.*

Jesus tells us something of his heart for children — God's heart — the heart of a Child, the heart of a King, a Father's heart and a Shepherd's heart. We need to follow the example of the Lord Jesus — to respect children, to protect children and to rescue children.

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