

## Out with the Old, and in with the New!

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Here we are on the eve of a new year—2019. For the next two or three weeks, any time I write down the day's date, I will be writing "2018" instead of "2019." All of us will have to get used to the New Year. And that has never been easy for people—getting used to the "new" and putting the "old" behind them. And that's why when the New Year comes, we usually see some cartoon or icon of this guy with a long white beard who looks like he's about 100 years old slowly shuffling into the shadows as this acrobatic baby jumps into the scene—all representing the New Year springing in and the old year passing into history. Now back in Jesus' day, they didn't celebrate the New Year like we do today, but I think He would have taken this holiday as a good time to teach an object lesson. Actually, he did teach a very important lesson that used a small child as the teaching point. And we find this lesson in Matthew's Gospel. It's a good lesson to think about as we ring out the "old" and ring in the "new."

This is what Matthew has to say to us: <sup>1</sup> About that time the disciples came to Jesus to ask which of them would be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven! <sup>2</sup> Jesus called a small child over to him and set the little fellow down among them, <sup>3</sup> and said, "Unless you turn to God from your sins and become as little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven." <sup>4</sup> Therefore anyone who humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven." Matthew 18:1-4 (The Living Bible)

This short teaching gives us a truly "**old**" vs. "**new**" contrast to think about. And, it is a very important contrast because there is a lot at stake here. And what is at stake is one's personal salvation. Jesus is telling His disciples, as He is also telling us, that those who continue to hold onto the "**old**" way of looking at things—well, they are not destined for the Kingdom of Heaven. On the other hand, the "**new**" way of thinking is the ticket into the Kingdom. And what the disciples found so disturbing was the fact that Jesus was telling them that they needed to readjust their way of looking at things if they wanted a ticket into the Kingdom of God. So let's first consider what this "**old**" way of thinking was all about, then see how the "**new**" way differs from it. Then honestly ask yourselves which way identifies with your way of thinking.

Well, if the "**old**" way of thinking is characterized by the disciples, what was it exactly that they apparently thought that had them on the wrong course? To answer that, it is helpful if we have a little more of the historical context surrounding what had taken place. Only a day or so before Jesus' disciples had asked Him which one of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus had informed them of something very important. The previous chapter in Matthew indicates that Jesus was very frank with them. He did not sugar-coat things at all. This is how Matthew describes it: <sup>22</sup> One day

while they were still in Galilee, Jesus told them, “I am going to be betrayed into the power of those<sup>23</sup> who will kill me, and on the third day afterwards I will be brought back to life again.” And the disciples’ hearts were filled with sorrow and dread. Matthew 17:22-23 (The Living Bible)

Now you would have thought that upon hearing this from Jesus, the disciples would have had a million other questions to ask Him, like: “Why is it necessary that you are going to be killed? Or, “What do you mean that you will be ‘brought back to life again’?” But, rather than asking those kind of questions, they opted for this very self-centered one about which one of them was going to have the highest rank in the Kingdom Jesus was going to establish. To put it into context, it was about as uncaring, as if someone told a friend that they had a terminal illness and would not be living much longer, and all the friend could ask was whether he could have the dying person’s new car.<sup>1</sup> So what was driving the disciples’ thinking here that they would ask such a cold and unfeeling question of Jesus? Well, their thinking was being driven by the “*old*” ways of the world all around them. And if they adopted such a worldly outlook, then the heartless question that they asked seems quite natural.

You see, the disciples may have been impressed by the tremendous power that the Roman Empire exercised over their land. The powerful Roman army was headed up by centurions who had complete control over groups of 100 men. Then, the next rank was that of the Roman tribune who wielded power over an even greater number of troops. This regimented power structure of the Roman war machine ran through Pontius Pilate right on up to Caesar himself. The disciples may have sensed the fact that the reason the Roman military forces were so overwhelming came out of their highly organized and efficient chain of command. And realizing this, the disciples may have been a little bit jealous of this. Couple this with the fact that Jesus had been telling them that His *Kingdom* was about to come, and they seemed anxious to make certain that they got their just desserts when it came to appointing the ranking members of this Kingdom. That’s the “*old*” way of thinking. That’s a mindset overrun by a greed for personal supremacy and domination over others.<sup>2</sup> It’s the kind of thing that sours into the mentality of our “dog-eat-dog” world. Manifested in its most extreme form, it develops into a worldview that doesn’t need God. And those who believe that they don’t need God end up rejecting Him and set themselves up as their own gods. Now, don’t get me wrong, the disciples were nowhere near this extreme position, but it had to be so very disappointing for Jesus to hear them ask such a question: “Who’s gonna be the greatest among us in Heaven?”

What is disheartening for us today is that, more and more, we can see people who openly embrace such an extreme position. That extreme position has a name. It’s called atheism—the belief that God does not exist. And once a person adopts such a view, they don’t have any problem setting

themselves up as god over the world. They don't have any issue when it comes to answering the question, "Who is number one?" For them, the answer is easy: "I am"—they proclaim with absolute ease. And boy are there a lot of people like that today, and the world seems to love them. For instance, earlier this month, CBS's 60 Minutes show aired an interview by the reporter, Lesley Stahl, of Elon Musk. As you may know, Musk is the 47 year old billionaire who has started such money makers as the Tesla electric car company and the ever popular PayPal business that allows on-line payments to be facilitated. Lesley Stahl seemed to be absolutely captivated by him. Or, take the *The New York Times* as another example of the media ogling over such people. *The New York Times* has stated that Elon Musk is "arguably the most successful and important entrepreneur in the world."<sup>3</sup> No question about it—he's a very intelligent guy when it comes to technology and business. Yet, he is also a very foolish man when it comes to God. In another recent interview in Rolling Stone magazine, Musk was asked if he believed in God, to which he answered: "Not really. I believe in science." And when asked what he thought happens to you when you die, he quickly responded: "I think you cease to exist. I hope I'm wrong in a positive way. But most likely, you're just gone."<sup>4</sup> It is so very ironic that the world looks to Elon Musk as if his views are something "*new*"—as if *he is* the way of the future—when, in fact, his outlook is the "*old*" way of seeing things. The ancient world was full of people like Elon Musk and they have existed, in varying numbers, in all generations. The Book of Judges describes Elon Musk and his clones exactly when it talks about "*people who do whatever seems right in their own eyes,*"<sup>5</sup> regardless as to whether or not it is right in the eyes of God.

Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that the future—the one that involves the Kingdom of Heaven—it *excludes* entry to people who live by their own rules and not by those of God. And so, Jesus brought forward a little child as an example of the "*new*" way—the way by which one gains entry into Heaven. And so, as we read, Jesus said: "Unless you . . . become as little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven." Now, what did he mean by that? Well, let's first understand what He is not saying. Jesus is not telling us to be *childish*. There is an immense difference between being "*childish*" and "*childlike*." A childish person is one who is immature, and Jesus certainly does not want us to have an immature faith. That kind of faith is cheap. It is a mindless, blind faith—which is actually very little, if any, faith at all. It is the kind of faith that we leave some of our teenagers with, and when they go to college or get out into the real world, it is a faith that usually withers away into nothingness.

But, unlike *childishness*, a "*childlike*" faith is a whole different story. A "*childlike*" faith mirrors a very young child's realization that he or she is unable to meet their own needs—that they are absolutely dependent upon their parents to meet their daily needs. *Childlike faith* is a faith that expresses a *sense*

*of dependence* upon God in seeing that our needs are met. It is a faith that **trusts** in God's provision, even during our most difficult trials of life. **Childlike faith** holds a sense of wonder at both God's existence and His complete sovereign power over all things in this universe. Now, the Bible teaches that the human heart is desperately wicked<sup>6</sup>, and that is true. But, that wickedness, as innate as it may be as part of the human condition, is something that grows as we pass beyond the innocence of our early childhood—because young children are very different from the Elon Musk's of this world. Young children have a wonderful sense of **what is real** and **what is true**. Even psychologists attest to this youthful innocence that can readily sense the truth and detect a lie. This is particularly true when it comes to accepting the concept of God and His existence.

As it turns out, psychologists have come to the conclusion that young children in virtually every culture on earth have a concept of God. Yale psychologist, Paul Bloom, states that *"when children are directly asked about the origin of animals and people, they tend to prefer explanations that involve an intentional creator, even if the adults who raised them do not."* This appears to be true even if the children are raised by parents who are atheists. Justin Barrett, who is a psychologist at Oxford University, has come to the same conclusion. Dr. Barrett has found that scientific evidence points to the fact that *"built into the natural development of children's minds [is] a predisposition to see the natural world as designed and purposeful and that some kind of intelligent [supreme] being is behind that purpose."* He goes on to say that even if a group of children were put *"on an island and they raised themselves . . . they would believe in God."* Then, he makes a most interesting comment: *"It appears that we have to be educated out of the knowledge of God by secular schools and media."*<sup>7</sup>

Now you might think that Dr. Bloom and Dr. Barrett are alone in their assessments, but that is hardly the case. Another researcher by the name of Sofia Cavaletti concurs with both of them. She has been at the forefront of studying the spirituality of children at a very early age. And one of her most significant findings is that young children have the capacity to resist any suggestions that God does not exist—again, even if their atheist parents try to teach them otherwise. She was particularly impressed by her study of a three-year old little girl who was raised by atheists. Her parents forbid there being any Bibles in their home and they never attended any church whatsoever. One day, this little girl asked her father, "Where did the world come from?" And, of course, he told her it was all a product of evolution and mere random chance. Following this scientific explanation, he added: *"There are some people who say that all this comes from a very powerful being, and they call him God."* Up until the time her father said this, the little girl had been frowning with a puzzled look on her face. But, when this atheist father mentioned the possibility of God, the frown almost instantly faded away and she started skipping about

in joy as she turned to her father and said, ***“I knew what you told me wasn't true—it's Him, it's Him [referring to God as Creator of all things]!”***<sup>8</sup>

And finally, there is the example of the author, Anne Lamott. Her atheist dad actually had her and her sibling agree to a contract when they were about three years old that they would never believe in God. But, despite her father's best efforts to dissuade her, she states: ***“Even when I was a child I knew that when I said ‘Hello’ [all alone at night in the silence of my room] someone heard [me].”***<sup>9</sup>

So it appears that scientific evidence, as well as the personal testimony of children who were raised by atheists, all indicate that God has wired us to believe in Him. It is only when people get older, beyond the years of their early youth, and start taking in the ways of the world that they tend to go astray and lose these precious childlike qualities. And that's where the disciples had gone wrong before Jesus addressed them with this little child standing before them. The theologian, Ivor Powell, put it well when he stated it this way: ***“The disciples had failed to differentiate between God's kingdom, established on love, and the empire of Caesar, based on military power. Love, as such, hardly existed among the soldiers, where obedience was demanded from every man. Disobedience led to reprimand, and repeated reprimands led to execution. The citizens of God's kingdom knew no compelling force except love. They obeyed their Master, because they desired so to do.”***<sup>10</sup>

That's what Jesus was trying to teach His disciples—that one's rank and position doesn't matter at all. Rather, they needed to adopt toward Him the same kind of attitude as little children have toward their parents—they needed to adopt an attitude of complete trust and reliance. That is what their relationship with Him had to be based upon—not upon one's laurels and selfish pride. Again, to quote Ivor Powell: ***“Within the realms of the eternal, it was better to be a trusting child of God than a scheming adult, lusting for importance.”***<sup>11</sup> A trusting relationship is the only one that we can have with God that will allow faith to mature and love to grow. Any other attitude leaves life empty—***devoid of both God and of love.***

For those who may be ranked highly in Forbes' magazine's listing of the richest people in the America—they may have hoarded the material things of the world and have billions in the bank, but I suspect that many, if not most of them, feel unloved and all alone. It may come as no great surprise to hear that Elon Musk, after divorcing his wife and breaking up with his actress girlfriend, has this to say: ***“Being in a big empty house, and no footsteps echoing through the hallways, no one over there . . . How do you make yourself happy in a situation like that?”*** He reflected upon that and then added, ***“When I was a child, there was one thing I said: ‘I never want to be alone.’”*** And then, after considering his present condition he repeated, almost in a whisper, ***“I never want to be alone.”***

I think that children know what it takes to never be alone—their sense of God and their great faith in His ability to provide for them assure them that they never will be alone. The problem for so many—ones who are captivated by the “**old**” ways of Elon Musk, they remain lonely children who have grown to reject God and never understand why “**out with the old and in with the new**” is not just something to be said during New Years. For the Christian, it is a **way of life**. It is the **way to life**. It is the “**new way**” to which Jesus pointed when He told His disciples about a little child. It is what God’s Word tells you today when it says: <sup>12</sup> Beware then of your own hearts, dear brothers, lest you find that they, too, are evil and unbelieving and are leading you away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> Speak to each other about these things every day while there is still time so that none of you will become hardened against God, being blinded by the glamor of sin. <sup>14</sup> For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as we did when we first became Christians [like we did when we were just little children], we will share in all that belongs to Christ. Hebrews 3:12-14 (The Living Bible) And so, we can enter into His Kingdom, skipping with joy in our hearts—hearts like those of a little child.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church  
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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor  
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<sup>1</sup> Greg Laurie, *Following Jesus in the Modern World*, Kerygma Publishing/U.S., (2013) p. 213.

<sup>2</sup> Ivor Powell, *Ivor Powell Commentaries – Matthew’s Majestic Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1986), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 327-329.

<sup>3</sup> Neil Strauss, “Elon Musk on His Fears, Dreams, Twitter, Morality and Mars,” *Rolling Stone* (11-17-17).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “In those days Israel had no king; all the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.” Judges 21:25 (New Living Translation, Second Edition)

<sup>6</sup> “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” Jeremiah 17:9 (King James Version)

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Pearcey, “Finding Truth: 5 Principles for Unmasking Atheism, Secularism, and Other God Substitutes” (David C. Cook, 2015), Page 31.

<sup>8</sup> John Ortberg, “God Is Closer than You Think,” Dallas Willard Center (accessed 4-28-17).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ivor Powell, *Ivor Powell Commentaries – Matthew’s Majestic Gospel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1986), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 327-329.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.