

## PROFICIENT AT PRETENDING

Matthew 11:16-19

Christ found in childhood a realm of loveliness and enchantment. He was fond of children, and they were fond of Him. We cannot forget the scene in which our Lord administered rebuke to His ambitious and quarrelsome disciples by placing a child in their midst and quietly announcing, "Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). Open, eager, unpretentious, and trustful was the childlikeness which the Master extolled. This was the idealistic use of childhood for purposes of illustration.

In our text we have a realistic view of children, particularly spoiled ones. Christ enjoyed watching children at play in the village squares and in the marketplaces. One day He saw some children playing in a milling marketplace, entirely oblivious to the adults around them. All went smoothly and well for awhile, and then the inevitable conflict developed, for there was one group under the leadership of one boy and a second group under the leadership of another. There were some who did not participate in the games. Refusing to play, they watched the others from the sidelines and sulked. If a child does not care to play, there is something wrong. Play is as natural for a child as breathing. All normal children delight in playing. But, strange to say, these children were not playing. They were glaring angrily at each other and quarreling.

"What's the matter, children" Why aren't you playing?" An angry-voiced youngster, speaking for one group said, "They won't play with us." A spokesman for the other group quickly replied, "We will, too; you won't play yourself." One lad had remarked, "Let's play wedding. Jacob can be the groom and Rachel will be the bride. John can be the rabbi and the rest of us can be groomsmen and bridesmaids." But John refused, saying, "No, I don't want to play wedding, that's too silly." The leader then said, "All right, then, let's play funeral. I'll be the corpse, John can be the preacher, Samuel can be the undertaker, and the rest can be pallbearers." But they said, "No, we don't want to play that—playing funeral is too sad."

The children would not play wedding because it was too mirthful or glad, and they would not play funeral because it was too sad. They were not playing at all, but rather glaring at one another—fretful, angry, and unhappy.

Speaking to the Pharisees Christ made a personal and specific application of the story, saying, "The men of this generation are just like those children. There is nothing that seems to satisfy them." To illustrate that fact, Christ reminded them that not many months before a prophet of amazing power, whose name was John the Baptist, had appeared in their midst, thundering divine judgments and calling all men to repentance. John the Baptist spoke against sin with deep conviction and scathing severity. He did not spare any wrong-doer. He so preached that he practically emptied the cities and filled the wilderness with the throngs that came to hear him. When they went out to hear him, he flayed them for their hypocrisy and pride. Then, when he was invited to preach at the court of Herod, he was just as unsparing in his denunciation of sin as he had been in the wilderness. This fearless evangelist had demanded a thorough-going clean-up of the moral corruption around the palace. And none of them liked it. They turned John the Baptist down with the contemptuous charge that he was possessed of a demon. His habits of life, his style of preaching, his lack of association with the people, etc., led them to criticize him severely. He was not a good handshaker. He was not much given to pastoral visiting. He was never

invited to be a toastmaster at a banquet or a speaker at a civic club. They said he was too hard and harsh, entirely too austere. They wanted a preacher who was a good mixer, but they complained that nobody could get close to John the Baptist. They said they liked a message full of sweetness and light, and that he never preached one of that type. Shrugging their shoulders, they turned away from him, refused to hear him preach, and declared that he was possessed of a demon.

Christ also reminded His hearers that following John the Baptist was another Preacher Who was quite different. He was sociable, friendly, and easy to approach. He called men to repentance, but He did it in a way that was as winsome as the sunrise and as sweet as the perfume of flowers. He declared that He had come that men might have life and have it in abundance. His message was an offer of a new freedom, a new power, and a new joy. He lived among men and was elbowed by the crowds. He went into homes where He was made welcome and where the atmosphere was sweet with the breath of love. He went into other homes where He was insulted and where the atmosphere was filled with suspicion and hate. So far as we know, He never refused an invitation to any home. So, the Pharisees did not like Him either. They said He was too affable with all classes of people. They called Him a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. Christ bluntly told His listeners that they were just like those petulant and spoiled children, in that nobody could please them and nothing could satisfy them. They did not like John the Baptist and called him a demoniac. They did not like the Lord Jesus and called Him a glutton and a winebibber. It was this inconsistency in them that drew forth from Christ the words of our text.

In effect, Christ was saying, "You are like peevish and unreasonable children. It is expected that six-year-olds would prefer a world of make-believe to one of reality, but when the practice is carried over into adult life it is pathetic. You have substituted for the simplicity and openness of childlikeness at its best the fickleness, selfishness, and stubbornness of childishness at its worst. You are simply playing at religion, and making a bad job of it."

This denunciation of our Lord needs to be delivered to the church members of our day, who have become so childish in their behavior. Professing Christians today need to be stabbed by the truth into a realization of how easy it is just to play at religion. In all too many instances we, too, act like children when we ought to be mature. Our Lord can speak of us as children playing at living. Our hurried, feverish generation gulps down its breakfast, bolts to the shop or office, races home through crazy traffic, reads the comic sheets, tunes in on a television star, takes an aspirin or something stronger, and calls it a day. A superficial multitude dabbles in scores of things tries to talk learnedly of many matters, but only exposes a pitiful ignorance of all. Compare the poetry of today with the bards of old, modern music with the old masters, modern politicians who only run for an office with the former statesmen who stood for something, and you behold a Punch-and-Judy show. We are only children playing in the marketplace, just pretending to live, acting parts in a comedy that turns out to be a tragedy, just trying to pose our way through a dramatized version of ourselves.

Childishness is marked by a desire to play with life. Many of us have heard children say, and we can remember having said, "Let us play-like...." Sometimes we play-like we are having church. At other times we play-like we are building a house in which

to live. Now that is perfectly all right for a six-year-old, but it is a sad state of affairs for one who is an adult. All adults should move out of the land of fiction into the realm of reality. We ought not to live in an imaginary world any longer.

When we turn to the churches, we discover, even as our Lord found it among the Pharisees, multitudes just playing at religion. We have developed the greatest crop of cry babies the world has ever known. There is nothing that satisfied them. Any more a minister hardly knows how to preach to such superficial church members, perpetually turned aside by other issues. Give them a serious word and they do not want it because they miss it in the notes of severity or solemnity. Regardless of how the Word of God is presented, they always find a way of side-stepping the need of self-involvement. What they want, even they do not know; but what they do not want is quite clear. They do not want anything that would compel them to enter the presence of God, or oblige them to take up the cross and follow the Lord Jesus.

If you ever had to entertain a child indoors on a rainy day, you will know something of this attitude toward religion. The child soon grows weary of any game and wants someone to provide a new form of entertainment. Nothing pleases for very long at a time. In former days, such people made a new profession every time a new evangelist came to town, but today they don't go to the trouble of hearing any evangelist. Instead, they drift from one church to another or from one strange sect to an even stranger one. These game-players keep their eyes on the distant situations lest they see something close at hand demanding attention. It is not their intention to let religion become a prod to their consciences or a call to duty. Their motto is to keep it general and distant. To such people genuine Christianity is offensive because it dares to say that some things are wrong. To them Christianity is a matter of special services on special occasions and of paying a solemn respect to God a few times a year, like Easter and Mother's Day. To them religion is just a game limited to special occasions. Of course, the most popular occasions are those when they get fed from the expenditures of the tithes of the devoted Christians.

When Christ was here on earth, the public square was not only a marketplace, but also the place where the people met to hear the news, to gossip, and to pass away the time. Here again the make-believe Christians of this present age have assembled. Call it by any modern name, but there you will find make-believe Christians wasting time instead of redeeming it. It is no wonder that these poor souls sit listlessly at church on Sunday morning, having ears but hearing not, having eyes but seeing not, and having hearts but feeling not. Their minds are still out in the public places where this silly generation chatters about the newest styles, the latest pictures, and the freshest scandal. These childish Christians are only playing at religion; it is not their life. Just as those children of our Lord's time played wedding and funeral, piped and mourned, so these present-day Christians pretend first to rejoice and then to weep. They sing with gusto:

"Perfect submission, all is at rest,  
I in my Saviour am happy and blest.  
Watching and waiting, looking above,  
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love;  
This is my story, this is my song,  
Praising my Saviour all the day long."

But they are neither submitted, happy, nor at rest, and as far as praising the Saviour all the day long is concerned, when did they ever do that?

Childishness is not only marked by a desire to play with life, but also by selfishness. As the psychologists tell us, children are egocentric. Their world revolves around themselves. Everything they see they want for themselves; and unless they get it, they are very unhappy. If they remain egocentric, it will be too bad for them and too bad for society. The resulting clash will ultimately break them, and it will certainly damage society.

Childishness is also characterized by self-pity. Many go to church for the attention they receive. Did you ever hear anyone say, "You know, I'm not going back to that church any more because nobody spoke to me?" Now a church should be the friendliest place, but surely we do not go to church primarily to have people speak to us. Rather, we should go to church to let God speak to us and to worship Him.

Furthermore, childishness is marked by a failure to recognize obligation. Children just do not seem to realize that they have any obligation to do any work. They do not understand that they are to help carry the load. Eventhough this is normal behavior for children, it is not right for those of us who have been born into the family of God.

Unfortunately some professing Christians have never grown up. If a child fails to grow, it becomes a disappointment and a heartache. Or, if it grows physically and fails to grow intellectually and spiritually, the result is even more tragic. Far too often the heart of God is broken by His children who are the victims of arrested development.

Few sins are more common, deceptive, and disastrous than that of pious make-believe. Indeed one can become so proficient at pretending that he leads himself astray. Instead of pretending to be what you are not, let Christ live in and through you.