

## NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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The Way of the Child

Dr. Mark Batterson

### **Intro:**

Welcome to the National Community Church podcast. We're thrilled to be able to share this weekend message with you from Pastor Mark Batterson. If you would like to subscribe find us on iTunes or go to theaterchurch.com.

### **Pastor Mark:**

Isn't it amazing the way that sometimes we take the little things for granted? Because we aren't gathered physically I'm sitting here worshiping and just you have no idea how much I want to reach out and give you a big hug and listen, that day will come. But I want to say so grateful that you're with us online this weekend. We continue an eight part series 'The Jesus Way'. We talked about 'The Way of the Wilderness', 'The Way of the Towel', 'The Way of the Vine and this week we talk about 'The Way of the Child'. You can meet me in Matthew 18.

Here we go. In the 1960s, a longitudinal study on creativity was conducted with 1600 kids that spanned about two decades. The researchers adapted eight evaluations designed by NASA to measure divergent thinking. Now divergent thinking is one dimension of creativity, its thinking outside the box its creative solutions to complex problems. So convergent thinking would be logical, rational, analytical. Divergent thinking, well, that's intuitive, innovative and artistic. The study found that 98%, 98% of children between the ages of three and five score in the genius category for divergent thinking. That number drops to 32% between the ages of eight and 10. And by the time those prodigies become teenagers dips down to 10% and only 2% of the original group over the age of 25 scored in the genius category for divergent thinking. What happened, right? Well hold that thought.

According to research done by Roth Smith, kids ask 125 questions per day. And right not here, the parents given me an Amen. A lot of them are why questions right? Well, adults on average, ask six. So somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we lose about 119 questions per day. What we really lose, I think is childlike wonder. What we lose is that holy curiosity that is innate to the way of the child. Now couple that with this, according to Dr. Robert Holden, children laugh 150 times per day. And listen, these statistics are admittedly all over the map, but a commonly cited study on laughter puts the adult average at 17.5 laughs per day. So somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we lose about 132.5 laughs per day. I think what we really lose is that childlike joy. What we lose is that holy sense of humor that is innate to the way of the child. Now listen, laughter in my opinion, part of the image of God. When the great commandment says, "*Love the Lord your God with all your mind*" that includes the medial ventral prefrontal cortex. It's a part of the brain that enables us to find things funny, and it's absolutely unique to the human species. Bottom line, the happiest and healthiest and holiest people on the planet are the people who laugh the most. Listen, like everything else laughter is a stewardship issue.

3000 years ago, the writer of Proverbs said, "*Laughter doeth good like a medicine.*" Now, neuro imaging, finally catching up with and corroborating what scripture said many millennia ago. Laughter

releases endorphins releases dopamine releases human growth hormone. It's a natural painkiller and its part of our rest and recovery from the side effect of stress. Do we need a little bit of that right now? It has been a stressful week. Listen; if you have money invested in the stock market - whoo, you rode a roller coaster this week. The election cycle is not depolarizing the political situation okay. And the coronavirus has all of us on red alert around the clock around the world. Now listen, I know a lot of people said that is no laughing matter. You are absolutely right. But guess what? God has created us with this capacity, called a sense of humor. And it's intended to be an emotional release valve during stressful times.

I was on the phone with DirecTV this week. That's usually never fun. And customer service rep kept putting me on hold and she says I don't even know what's wrong with my computer today. I don't know what came over to me but I said maybe it has a coronavirus. Now listen, I don't even know if that's politically correct. She laughed for the next five minutes. And then I started laughing. Then she started laughing. She was crying by the time we were done. What I'm saying I think she needed it. I think I needed it. And so this is a serious situation, we're in the middle of a pandemic. But listen, if we lose our sense of perspective of who's sitting on the throne, if we lose even this sense of humor, we're in trouble.

Now, let me double back to this idea of divergent thinking. For more than 30 years Gordon McKenzie worked at Hallmark cards. His official title was creative paradox. His job was to challenge corporate normalcy. Now, I love that McKenzie wrote a book on creativity, one of my favorites, 'Orbiting the Giant Hairball'. And in that book he talks about the creativity workshops that he would do with elementary age children. McKenzie would ask a question up front. How many artists are in the room? He said that the pattern of response never varied. In the first grade, all of the kids are waving their arms and self identifying as Michael Angelo's. In the second grade, about half of the kids raise their hand. In the third grade, we're down to about a third of the class. And by the time you get to the sixth grade, not unlike the study that we just cited on divergent thinking it was down to one or two artistic types that would kind of self consciously identify as artistic. Gordon McKenzie said this, "Every school I visited was participating in the suppression of creative, genius." Ouch. He said, "Genius is the innocent casualty in society's efforts to train children away from their natural born foolishness from cradle to grave, the pressure is on, be normal." Now, I think the church has a tendency to make the same mistake.

So if you're taking notes, you can jot this down 'maturity does not equal conformity'. Yes, we are called to be conformed to the image of Christ, but that process of sanctification actually results in differentiation. Okay, Carl Jung would call it "individuation". It's this idea that we become more and more like ourselves, which is more and more different from the people around us. Now in the church I think conformity can often be a subtle form of spiritual codependency. It's religious peer pressure. And it results in legalism, which is an excessive adherence to a human code of conduct. It cares way too much about what the people around us think and not enough about what God thinks.

True maturity, always results in diversity. Let me explain. In the beginning, God created us in His image; we have been creating God in our image ever since it's called anthropomorphism. And we do the same thing with the people around us. We try to create them in our image. We want them to conform to our personality, our preferences, our prejudices, and our politics. And so I'm just going to

say like I see it. We would rather have people conform to us than conform to Christ and that's a problem.

Now, you heard me say this 100 times never has been, never will be anyone like you not a testament to you it's a testament to the God who created you. Significant to that is this, no one can worship God like you are for you, no one can serve God like you or for you. But I want to add a little amendment, okay. Uniqueness is God's gift to us. Ready? Diversity is our gift back to God. Listen, diversity celebrates everyone as invaluable and irreplaceable. And so, I think conformity, it's mandating that people fit our mold. Diversity recognizes that God has created each of us with unique fingerprint, unique voiceprint, unique eye print and I would add unique soul print. And then God broke the mold. The bottom line is quit trying to be who you're not. Listen, if you is who you ain't you ain't who you is. Conformity to Christ is the catalyst for diversity. And it's where our core conviction comes from that the church ought to be the most diverse place on the planet. Listen, this is so beautiful the gospel gives you permission to be you. And yet, the peer pressure is on from cradle to grave, as Gordon McKenzie says to be normal. Now, Webster defines normal as conforming to the accepted model pattern or standard. Here's my definition, normal is cashing out on your uniqueness and conceding to conformity.

Not only is normal, boring, it's unbiblical. I mean, the last time I checked Romans 12:2 "Do not be conformed to the pattern of the world around you, but be transformed (how) by the renewing of your mind." Now I want you to dial in right here. If you want, hit pause, go check out a Bible concordance and then come back but but if not, we'll keep going. Okay? The Greek verb translated renewing, powerful word, it refers to a recycling process whereby something that is used and abused becomes like new again, it's a refurbished computer. It's a reconditioned iPhone. It's a renovated home. Listen, God is taking us through a recycling process. And it not only reverses the damage done, listen to me, it repurposes us for his plans and his purposes. I believe that for your life, this weekend, you are a new creation in Christ.

John 10 says that "*the enemy comes to steal, kill, and destroy*". I think the enemy wants to steal pieces of your personality puzzle. But what happens is these pieces of your personality are held hostage by painful moments in your past. I think some of them are traumatic. Honestly, some of them are barely blips on the radar. And I'll give you an example. You're hesitant to insert your opinion in a group setting because of something that happened in a classroom 27 years ago. I know what happened. You raised your little hand. You gave what you thought was the right answer, but it was wrong and everybody laughed. And you wonder why there's a hesitation to step into that moment. You're held hostage by something that happened a long time ago. Listen, you're afraid of proposing to someone you love, whether you know it or not because of your parents' divorce, you're held hostage by something that happened in the past. I think all of us, its mistakes that we've made or things that have been done to us. We're held hostage by past disappointments, past mistakes, past embarrassments, past hurts. We could keep going, but I'm gonna stop right there.

Let me get where this is going. Gordon McKenzie came to this conclusion. He said, "My guess is that there was a time--perhaps when you were very young, when you had at least a fleeting notion of your own genius and you were just waiting for some authority figure to come along and validate it for you. But none ever came." Enter Jesus, the enemy comes to steal, kill and destroy he came that we might

have life and have it more abundantly. McKenzie says, "There's a fool in each of us, a rash, brash, harebrained, audacious imprudent, ill suited spontaneous in politic daredevil fool, which, in most of us, was long ago. hog-tied and locked in the basement."

Take a breath. There are moments in my life, I think there are moments in your life, something happened got hogtied, something got locked in the basement, stick with me. In his first sermon, the first thing Jesus said was I came to set captives free. We hear the word captive and we think addict and I have no doubt that he can set you free for your addiction to drugs or pornography or food or work or the approval of other people, whatever, he can set you free. But you know what? I think it also means that he came to set free this inner child within us that was hogtied and locked in the basement long ago.

I've been praying for you this week that God would let that inner child out. I come with some good news. It's never too late to be who you might have been. Listen to me. Jesus is the authority figure you have been waiting for; to let you out and help you become who you were meant to be. He comes alongside us< "I will never leave you nor forsake us." He's the one who then helps us discover our true identity. That is the Jesus way that is the way the child.

Matthew 18, I bet you're there by now. Here we go.

*"<sup>1</sup>At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" <sup>2</sup> Jesus called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. <sup>3</sup> And he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, (become like little children), you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>5</sup> And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."*

Let me set the scene, the disciples ask a question, "Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Now listen, the disciples are asking this question, of course, because they want to honor one another above themselves. Or not. Okay. There's a lot of gamesmanship happening right here, there's a lot of one upmanship. Here's the reality, the disciples don't eat Get what Jesus is trying to do. The Jewish people as a whole want to overthrow Roman rule. Their expectation at the outset is that Jesus would maybe do a coup d'état established an earthly administration. Basically, they're jockeying for cabinet positions, who's gonna be the VP, who's gonna be the Attorney General, Secretary of State? They are in fighting like a political party in a primary season.

I love the way Jesus answers the question, throws them a curveball. He calls a little child from the crowd, positions a little child in the center of the circle, and then just flips their entire social structure upside down. He says, "*Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like this little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*" So divergent in so many different ways. Think this ranked as one of the most kaleidoscopic statements in all of Scripture. It could be maybe should be a series unto itself. We're barely gonna skim the surface. But listen, here's what I would challenge you to do. This week dig in on your own. Our discipleship team is prepared these daily devotionals as a part of our daily office during Lent [NCC.re/theway](http://NCC.re/theway) and so you can dig a little deeper on your own.

In the 19th century, a Scottish botanist named Sir John Kirk, who, by the way, actually accompany David Livingston on his second expedition to Africa made a fascinating political . He said that there

should always be a little child positioned in the heart of London. Okay, maybe St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey and Kirk said if he had his way that no one would be allowed to contest a seat in Parliament or become a candidate for public office until he had spent a full day with that child and passed an examination in the child's novel methods of thought, feeling and expression. Listen, the first time I read that I remember thinking to myself, that's brilliant and then I realized, that's Jesus. That's exactly what he does. He puts a child at the epicenter of the kingdom says, you can't even get in the front door unless you become like this little child.

Now a question, of course, is what does that mean? And listen, I've hinted at it a little bit. Yes, I think it is recapturing childlike wonder, childlike joy. Yes, I think it's asking more questions. I think it's laughing more often. I think it's wholly curiosity. I think its childlike faith. I think its 100 different things. But let me get where this is going in First Corinthians 13. It's important when we study scripture that juxtapose text with text and it gives us a dimensionality in the way that we understand it and I think this is a great example. The apostle Paul says, "*When I was a child, I thought like a child, talked like a child, I reasoned like a child, when I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.*" Big difference. Listen to me, between childish and childlike. I think childish, is we all know that person, don't we? Like probably ought to be a little bit more emotionally or relationally mature at this point, but this word literally means simple minded.

Now, Oliver Wendell Holmes, former Supreme Court Justice said that there are two kinds of simplicity. There's simplicity on the near-side of complexity and there's simplicity on the far-side of complexity. Now, I'm gonna put a few things on the screen. Simplicity on the near-side of complexity is childish. Simplicity on the far-side of complexity is childlike. Now, let's be honest, a lot of Christians have settled for simplicity on the near-side of complexity. They know what they believe but they don't know why they believe what they believe. They're not willing to duel with some of the doubts that honestly all of us have, there's no place for paradox. Their dualism doesn't allow them the tension of opposites. And you know what, I've met so many people who their theology is like a Jenga block, you pull out one piece, and the whole thing tumbles to the ground. If Genesis one isn't seven literal days, then our faith falls apart. Listen that isn't childlike faith I think that's childish faith. First Corinthians 14 says, "*Stop thinking like children. In regards to evil, be infants, but in your thinking, be adults.*"

Let me give you one more distinction. Childishness is acting like a child and I might even say acting up. Now childlikeness is becoming like a child. It's recapturing those redeeming qualities that we've talked about. By the way I love this Theodore Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss said that adults are obsolete children.

Let me zoom out a little bit, in 1997 Mitch Albom wrote in New York Times bestseller titled 'Tuesdays with Morrie'. Now, Mitch reconnects with his old college professor and they get together on Tuesday afternoons. Morrie downloads these profound lessons on life. And so on their seventh Tuesday together Morrie talks about the fear of aging. Now you need to understand at this point, Morrie Schwartz is 78 years old. He's dying from ALS and he's wearing adult diapers someone needs to wipe him and bathe him like a baby. And in that context, here's what Morrie says, "I embrace aging," emphasis on embrace. He says, "As you grow, you learn more." He says, "If you stayed 22 you'd always be as ignorant as you were at 22." Now listen he said it I didn't, okay. But I will say it's amazing

how much I knew when I was 22. Okay, reminds me of John Wilmont, who said, "Before I got married I had six theories about raising kids. Now I have six kids and no theories." Okay, that's kind of what I'm talking about right there.

Now, Morrie continues, "The truth is, part of me, is every age." This is one of the most beautiful perspectives on aging I've ever read outside the Bible. He says, "I'm a three year old. I'm a five year old. I'm a 37 year old. I'm a 50 year old. I've been through all of them and I know what it's like. I delight in being a child when it's appropriate to be a child. I delight in being a wise old man when it's appropriate to be a wise old man. Think of all I can be." And here it is this is what I love. "I am every age up to my own." Listen, I hope that maybe gives us a little different perspective on aging. Cicero said, "I like a young man in whom there is something old." Flips the coin says, "I like an old man in whom there is something young." Another sermon for another day. You know, I love the word 'neoteny'. It's a zoological word retention of youthful qualities into adulthood. Probably ought to be a picture of Dick Foth in there in the dictionary, okay, alright.

Leonardo da Vinci coined a phrase called post imaging. When we think about imagination we tend to think about imagining something in the future. But Da Vinci had a different idea. This is reimagining after the fact. Basically, its revisionist history and I know that that has negative and positive connotations, but I'm going to use it positively and personally. Question - do you think your seven year old self was really capable of remembering everything the right way? Stop and think about that. I think not our childhood memories, they're pixelated by time. Teenage memories tainted by hormones, right. You cannot change the past but you can post imagine it from God's point of view. Is this not what Joseph did? After 13 years false accusation in prison, you intended to harm me but God intended it for good. Listen, I believe that in your life, but you got to get that perspective. You have to post imagine it. And this is where we so desperately need the help of the Holy Spirit.

Do you know what Jesus called the Holy Spirit? Counselor. Do you know what the word is? Paraclete, it's a word picture. It's actually a Roman military formation where two soldiers would stand back to back with their shields in front of them. Guess what? The Paraclete was the rear guard. The Paraclete had their back. What a beautiful picture of who the Holy Spirit is, what the Holy Spirit does in our lives. We need the Holy Spirit to heal and seal and reveal. Now, the Holy Spirit heals things that we wish we could forget. The Holy Spirit seals things that we can't afford to forget. And the Holy Spirit reveals not just God to us, but guess what the Holy Spirit reveals us to us, If you want to know yourself, you got to get in relationship with the one who knows you better than you do.

And here's the bottom line. We post imagine our past, from two places I believe as followers of Christ. One is at the foot of the cross and the other is at the foot of God's throne. The cross is where we rediscover our true identity. And the throne is where we rediscover our full authority. The cross is where we find forgiveness. We're set free, and the throne is where God begins to tap that potential that he gave to you in the first place. The cross is where we see ourselves for who we are the apple of God's eye, Psalm 17:8. The throne is where God puts his signet ring on our finger. Do you know what that is? Haggai 2:23, the signet ring symbolized the full authority of an ancient King and His kingdom. And God says watch this. I'm gonna put that right on your finger. Come on, does that not change what you see when you look in the mirror? Does that not change when you walk into that difficult situation?

Let me dig a little deeper and then I'm done. Frederick Buechner another one of my favorite writers said this, "Beneath the face I am a family plot. All the people I've ever been are buried there - the bouncing boy, his mother's pride; the pimply boy and secret sensualist; the reluctant infantryman; the beholder at dawn through hospital plate-glass of his firstborn child. All these selves I was I am no longer, not even the bodies they wore are my body any longer, I can no longer remember what it felt like to live inside their skin. Yet they live inside my skin to this day, they are buried in me somewhere." And then he says this, "I am not the same as they are, I am not different either because their having been then is responsible for my being now."

Mom and Dad texted me a picture a couple of weeks ago I don't even remember this one. But this is me. I've got my two front teeth, barely. And my best guess is it's my first birthday. Now it's no coincidence I'm holding a ball in my right hand that would be the story of my life all the way through college. Listen, confession. I slept with a basketball okay? Now here's the thing. I don't remember this me. None of us do. Most of us don't have any memories until we're three or four or five. It's called infantile amnesia. And I'll be honest; I think it's a gift from God. I don't want to remember my parents changing my diaper. Okay. Listen, by the way, the word diaper spelled backwards is repaid, pretty apropos. So, we remember very little infantile amnesia, and we have selected a memory which means we remember wrong and that's where this idea of post imagining comes into play with the help of the Holy Spirit. We tend to remember what we should forget and forget what we should remember.

Benjamin Zander said it this way, "How often do we stand convinced of the truth of our early childhood memories forgetting that they are but assessments made by a child. If you remember wrong, you live a lie. Part of becoming like a little child is unpacking our past. It's reverse engineering the lies, the hurts the prejudices, the false assumptions that we've made about ourselves about other people, and about God Himself. And it's connecting the dots and seeing the way that God has worked in our past to prepare us for such a time as this for such place as this.

I'll close with this. When our children were young, we had some friends over for dinner one night, and as we were sitting around talking, Parker comes running through the family room, yelling, Captain Underpants. Would you like to venture a guess as to what my son was wearing? Yeah, underpants. Now listen, at some point we stopped doing this and listen, that's probably a good idea, although we're online this weekend, so, okay, alright.

I have a theory, and I wrote about it pretty extensively in Soul Print. And here it is self consciousness is the side effect of original sin. Remember Adam and Eve, they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and all of a sudden they realize that they're naked. And so here's the deal, remember how I already said that spiritual maturity trends away, trends away from conformity trends toward diversity? I think in the very same sense, spiritual maturity trends away from self-consciousness and toward God-consciousness. The more self-conscious you are, the less aware you are of God's presence. Why? Because you're so preoccupied with me, myself and I.

Eugene Peterson defined worship as interrupting our preoccupation with ourselves. We become less self-conscious, we become more God-conscious and that's why worship feels so good, feels so right. Self-consciousness cares way too much about what other people think. I want you to hear me. The

more you care about what people think about you, the less able you are to actually care for them. Kids could care less what other people think; they run through the room, half naked. Now, this weekend, I could have shared three keys to becoming more childlike. And I guess I shared a few things, ask more questions, maybe a few more laughs in the mix. But I felt like I wanted to dig a little deeper. I think some of us hogtied, locked in the basement because of some things that have happened in our past. I just am believing this weekend that Jesus wants to let that inner child out so that you can become who he destined you to become?

I'm going to share one little thing and it's something I shared with my counselor about six months ago, and I want to share it with you. It's gonna seem so minor but it was a breakthrough in my life. When I was about five or six years old, I was out playing kick the can in the neighborhood with all of my friends and my mom rang the dinner bell. This is how we texted our kids in the 70s, okay. And so my mom rings the bell, but I'm having so much fun I don't want to leave, I don't want to leave. And so I get home and I will never forget sitting down at the table and saying with just this internal angst and urgency, "We've got to hurry up and eat because my friends are waiting." And I don't think a five year old should feel as much tension as I felt; like I didn't want to keep my friends waiting. I didn't want to disappoint them. I think there was a little bit of five year old FOMO - fear of missing out. And I shared that story with my counselor and it's one of those aha moments, I realized that that may actually be a microcosm of my life. I'm a people pleaser. I said to my counselor, I don't want to disappoint anyone ever. And my counselor said to me, Mark, that's an awfully big burden to bear. Then he said this, and this is why I love Christian counselors because they let Jesus in the room. He said, "You know, Mark, Jesus disappointed just about everybody intentionally." I walked away from that moment thinking, man, is some of my conformity, just the byproduct of disappointing other people, of being a people pleaser and the Lord began a process of just setting me free. Sometimes you just have to name it, you just have to say it. And so listen like you I'm a, I'm a work in progress, but here's what I know for sure, okay. Attempting to please everybody all the time is not the Jesus way thou shall offend Pharisees. The Jesus way starts with humility. Whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of God. I think the Jesus way is simplicity on the far side of complexity, I think the Jesus way is authenticity and vulnerability, the courage to be yourself. And so, the disciples trying to one up each other, and Jesus puts them in their place.

I'm gonna ask the worship team to come just to prove that I'm almost done. No one wins the comparison game. Listen, if you play the comparison game, and it's hard not to do that, in a city where we live. It always results in pride or jealousy and so what comparison does is it results in this attempt to conform? But there's a better way. There's a diversity that God calls us to, as the children of God, everyone is invaluable and irreplaceable. And so this week, I'm thinking about this moment in the gospels in Matthew 18, where Jesus pulls this child in, says, Hey, this is what the kingdom of God looks like. And it's amazing how little moments from long ago can have a lasting effect in our lives I think for better or for worse. We have no idea who this child was, but would you agree with me? This is a moment that he never forgot the rest of his life thought about this moment that Jesus called him out. He said, "Look at this, this is what the kingdom looks like."

As I've been praying for you this week. I believe you're that child. I believe Jesus is calling you out, calling you into the middle of the circle and saying, this is your true identity, this is your full authority as



a child of God. He came to set the captives free pulls us into the middle of the circle. Can you hear it? Can you hear it? Can you hear him say, "*This is my beloved Son; This is my beloved daughter in whom I am well pleased.*"

Our worship team is going to close with the song that they wrote. It's a beautiful song titled "Whole". And I want you to think about these lyrics as we sing them together. The mask I wear for all to see, that covers all of the mess in me. I know that you see me still. Your secret place is safe for me, where I can see what you see in me. I know that I can simply be. May the Holy Spirit, heal and seal and reveal in you this weekend as we worship him together. In Jesus name, amen