

CHRIST-LIKE ATTRIBUTES AND BEHAVIORS
IN AUTISTIC AND SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN
Revision A

By Tom Irvine
Email: tomirvine@aol.com

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Autism is not a disorder... Rather it is a unique Christ-like trait.

This essay is inspired by my experiences with an autistic boy named Max and is also based on my own relationship with Jesus Christ, and on scripture study, meditation, and prayer. To look into the face of Max, or any other special needs child, is to see the face of God.

Introduction

The Bible introduces man's sojourn on the Earth with the following verses:

[26] And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . .

[27] So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

Genesis 1

To this seminal scriptural teaching, we may add:

And God created some children with special needs as a reflection of certain endearing, autistic tendencies within His own multifaceted soul.

Our Redeemer is perfect in that He is free from sin. He is all-knowing and all-powerful. And yet He came to mortal Earth-life, born as a babe in Bethlehem, to experience and learn empathy toward mankind, reaching a pinnacle in His great atoning sacrifice for mankind and His resurrection from the dead.

As our Savior condescended to mortality, He may have partially suppressed some of his divine personality traits in order to gain the experiences that He needed, and so that He

could bring salvation to mankind. Yet, His actions during his Earth life gave occasional glimpses of a particular enigmatic dimension of His soul. These character traits, suppressed as they might have been, enabled him to fulfill His mortal mission.

Man can scarcely begin to comprehend our Savior's eternal nature.

[8] For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

Isaiah 55

But perhaps our Christ-like autistic children may give us some important clues.

The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven

Our Savior taught:

[1] At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

[2] And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,

[3] And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

[4] Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

[5] And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.

Matthew 18

The child in verse [2] may well have been a special needs child. Or perhaps Jesus was reflecting wistfully on His own fundamental nature.

Family Relationships

Some autistic children have difficulty bonding with their parents. The children may seem aloof. The parents may become detached from their autistic children because they cannot understand the children's perplexing condition.

Consider the familiar story from Jesus' childhood.

[41] Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover.

[42] And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast.

[43] And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not of it.

[44] But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day's journey; and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance.

[45] And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him.

[46] And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions.

[47] And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.

[48] And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.

[49] And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?

[50] And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them.

Luke 2

Jesus was indeed going about his Heavenly Father's business, but detached from Mary and Joseph.

Even in his adulthood, our Lord still struggled with his familial relationships, as recorded in Matthew 12:46-49.

Finally, on the cross, Jesus showed sympathy to his mother by instructing John to care for her. John 19:27.

The boyhood story of Jesus in the Temple also shows that He had a savant-like, hyperfocus on scriptural teachings. Studies show that 50% of savants are autistic.

Empathy

Some autistic children may lack the ability to show empathy toward others, although this may only be an apparent symptom due to their inability to read body language.

The Book of Mormon gives these tender yet enigmatic verses describing our Saviors earthly mission.

[9] But behold, the Spirit hath said this much unto me, saying: Cry unto this people, saying—Repent ye, and prepare the way of the Lord, and walk in his paths, which are straight; for behold, the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and the Son of God cometh upon the face of the earth.

[10] And behold, he shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers, she being a virgin, a precious and chosen vessel, who shall be overshadowed and conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and bring forth a son, yea, even the Son of God.

[11] And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

[12] And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.

Alma 7

Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament, was born as Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Was Jehovah lacking in his ability to succor his people according to their infirmities? Were his bowels somehow lacking in mercy?

Jesus Christ performed the ultimate act of empathy by taking upon himself our sins in the Garden of Gethsemane and by offering his own life as the supreme sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary.

[20] But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept.

[21] For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

[22] For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

1 Corinthians 15

We may rightfully consider the significance of His sacrifice to be infinite

But He also occasionally restrained His empathetic tendencies in order to convey the teachings upon which He hyperfocused, as demonstrated by His rebuke of the disciples.

[23] But as they sailed he fell asleep: and there came down a storm of wind on the lake; and they were filled with water, and were in jeopardy.

[24] And they came to him, and awoke him, saying, Master, master, we perish. Then he arose, and rebuked the wind and the raging of the water: and they ceased, and there was a calm.

[25] And he said unto them, Where is your faith? And they being afraid wondered, saying one to another, What manner of man is this! for he commandeth even the winds and water, and they obey him.

Luke 8

Note that some autistic children have little concept of physical danger. Jesus understood that His disciples were in peril, but His mind was aligned in a different pattern.

In addition, there may be a lesson here that we should exercise greater faith rather than awaking the Master, but individual circumstances vary.

Numbers

Some autistic children have an affinity for numbers and mathematics. Even Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein had autistic traits, according to some scholars.

[21] Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

[22] Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

Matthew 18

Animals

Some autistic children have a special affinity for animals. The most well-known case is Temple Grandin, who became a Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University. My friend Max is also drawn to animals.

Jesus Christ taught that He is the Good Shepherd. He is also the Lamb of God, and He gave His own life as the ultimate Passover sacrifice.

Our Savior often referred to animals in His teachings. Even a sample of these scriptural accounts is too large for inclusion in the main text. References are given in Appendix A instead.

His birth in a lowly stable was congruent with these teachings.

As an aside, Jesus was raised in a carpenter's household. Yet he seldom referred to wood, furniture, or tools in his teachings. Perhaps He spent the bulk of his boyhood days in meditative wandering about the countryside and seashore, observing the shepherds and fishermen.

Noise

Some autistic children are very sensitive to noise.

The moneychangers in the temple would have generated a great deal of clamor as they bargained with their customers.

Jesus had good reasons for casting out the moneychangers from the temple, augmented by his own noise sensitivity.

[15] And they come to Jerusalem: and Jesus went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves;

[16] And would not suffer that any man should carry any vessel through the temple.

[17] And he taught, saying unto them, Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves.

Mark 11

Touch

Some children with autism are often hypersensitive to touch. Some may thus avoid being touched or hugged

The Good Shepherd himself was very sensitive to touch as recorded in the following Bible story.

[25] And a certain woman, which had an issue of blood twelve years,

[26] And had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse,

[27] When she had heard of Jesus, came in the press behind, and touched his garment.

[28] For she said, If I may touch but his clothes, I shall be whole.

[29] And straightway the fountain of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of that plague.

[30] And Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned him about in the press, and said, Who touched my clothes?

[31] And his disciples said unto him, Thou seest the multitude thronging thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me?

[32] And he looked round about to see her that had done this thing.

[33] But the woman fearing and trembling, knowing what was done in her, came and fell down before him, and told him all the truth.

[34] And he said unto her, Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace, and be whole of thy plague.

Mark 5

Even the resurrected Christ showed resistance to touch for a time.

[17] Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

John 20

Jesus would later let the disciples feel the nail prints in His hands, but He only when He was ready.

Massage Therapy

Again, some autistic children have an aversion to being touched. Interestingly, studies have shown that massage therapy may actually benefit these children.

[37] And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment,

[38] And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

[48] And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven.

[50] And he said to the woman, Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.

Luke 7

[1] Then Jesus six days before the passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead.

[2] There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him.

[3] Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.

John 12

The story of the unnamed woman in Luke 7 is about faith and repentance. Service and worship of the Lord are themes in both accounts. Yet, is there another dimension in both stories? Were these women also providing a healing touch?

Social Awareness

A lack of social awareness is a trait that many autistic children share.

Jesus dined with sinners and publicans, Matthew 9:10-14. He even called a publican to be one of his twelve disciples, Matthew 10:3.

He healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman, but only after making reference to a dog, Matthew 15:22-28.

He spent time with lepers. His ministry was to the outcasts, Psalm 147:2.

He healed on the Sabbath and performed other deeds which upset the social conventions of the Pharisees, scribes, elders, and chief priests. He often denounced them hypocrites, particularly in Matthew 23. Jesus ignored the need for diplomacy, tact, and political sensitivity.

The Great Redeemer had good reasons for all his words and actions, but He may have been so enabled by autistic tendencies of His own.

Words

Some autistic children have peculiar language mannerisms. These idiosyncrasies vary per individual.

[1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

[14] And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

John 1

God's Beloved Son used words in an unusual way. He often taught in riddle-like parables, which had multiple-layers of meaning.

Some autistic people, like Temple Grandin, think in pictures rather than words. Perhaps our Savior had His own tendency to think in imaginary which was reflected in His numerous parables.

Jesus even used puns and word-play in His speech.

[15] He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

[16] And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

[17] And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

[18] And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Matthew 16

Peters own name comes from the Greek *Petros*, which means *rock*.

Jesus also answered one of Peter's question with a mathematical equation as previously noted.

Insomnia

Some autistic children have trouble sleeping.

[20] And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.

Matthew 8

Eye Contact

Some autistic children avoid making eye contact with others.

[1] Jesus went unto the mount of Olives.

[2] And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them.

[3] And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst,

[4] They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act.

[5] Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou?

[6] This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not.

[7] So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.

[8] And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground.

[9] And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst.

[10] When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?

[11] She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

John 8

Jesus indeed rose up to make eye contact with those with whom He was speaking to, but He may well have preferred to remain stooped down, looking at the ground.

Isaac

Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac foreshadowed our Heavenly Father's sacrifice of His Only Begotten Son.

[1] And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.

[2] And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

[3] And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

[4] Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.

[5] And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you,

[6] And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.

[7] And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

[8] And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

[9] And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

[10] And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

[11] And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

[12] And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

[13] And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

Genesis 22

The Jewish scholar Moshe Reiss¹ describes Isaac as an “almost autistic patriarch.” Isaac obediently accepted his role as the sacrifice, perhaps enabled by his autistic tendencies. The reader is invited to study Reiss’ article in the reference for further consideration.

Repetition

Some autistic children have a habit of repeating certain words or actions.

[14] This is now the third time that Jesus shewed himself to his disciples, after that he was risen from the dead.

[15] So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.

[16] He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

[17] He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep.

John 21

Our Lord had good reasons for repeating the questions and commands that He gave to Peter. Were these reasons carried forward by underlying autistic tendencies?

Peter was saddened because he felt that the Lord lacked confidence in him, or at least this is the common explanation.

Or was Peter melancholy because he was unprepared to accept the Resurrected Lord’s tendencies and thought patterns?

Either way, Peter’s grief was misguided.

¹ Reference:

http://www.moshereiss.org/messenger/03_rebekahandisaac/03_rebekahandisaac.html

Conclusion

This subject is a very challenging one. I am fully aware that some Christians will consider it to be blasphemous or at least heretical. My purpose is rather to give glory and praise to Jesus Christ by extending my own empathy for Him in gratitude for the infinite empathy which He has already freely given to mankind.

And those whose lives have been touched by autism in one way or another will hopefully find some comfort from this article.

The key moment for me in the preparation of this article was the consideration of Jesus' refusal to allow Mary Magdalene to touch Him when He appeared as a Resurrected Being at the empty garden tomb. During His mortal ministry, He tended to be dismissive of formalities. There may well have been some valid reason that He first needed to present Himself to the Father. But I believe that He also delivered a secondary message regarding His own divine nature.

Once I came to this realization, the remainder of this article poured into my soul.

Furthermore, I have added subtext.

Our teaching and preaching often contains explanations such as "God hears our prayers, but He only answers them according to His own timetable." For example, our Lord walked across the stormy Sea of Galilee to rescue His disciples, but He waited until the fourth watch to do so (Matthew 14:22-33).

I largely accept these teachings, but they have the unintended consequence of implying an almost cold, calculating God who meticulously calibrates both our suffering and blessings. We might thus become frustrated with our Lord because our life is at times "unfair" or we may feel that Lord is deliberately delaying our entitled blessings.

Perhaps we can let go of such frustrations by developing the same compassionate, endearing love for our Savior as we might for a special needs child, and as we simply accept that His thought patterns are uniquely aligned.

Then let us proclaim:

We love him, because he first loved us.

1 John 4:19

APPENDIX A

Animals in the Lord's Teachings

The following is a partial list.

Matthew 8

[20] And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.

Matthew 17

[24] And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute money came to Peter, and said, Doth not your master pay tribute?

[25] He saith, Yes. And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented him, saying, What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers?

[26] Peter saith unto him, Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free.

[27] Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee.

Matthew 19

[24] And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

Matthew 21

[5] Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.

Matthew 23

[37] O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!

Mark 1

[16] Now as he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.

[17] And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.

Luke 12

[6] Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?

[7] But even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows.

Luke 14

[5] And answered them, saying, Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day?

Luke 22

[34] And he said, I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me.

John 1

[29] The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

John 10

[11] I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

[14] I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine.

In addition, the Lord gave the following vision to Peter.

Acts 10

[9] On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour:

[10] And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance,

[11] And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth:

[12] Wherein were all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.

[13] And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.

[14] But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.

[15] And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.

[16] This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven.