

"He's a good kid. He just has a problem
with stealing cars."

Rev. John Belden

I came across this quote in World magazine. A Florida woman said this after her 15-year-old brother was convicted four times for stealing cars. In addition to this, he was also convicted for cocaine distribution, marijuana possession, and larceny.

For those of you who haven't read last week's article, I am questioning the notion that children are naturally good. In saying this, I'm not suggesting that a newborn can commit sins. What I am saying is that every newborn has inherited a nature that will eventually commit sin. Or think of it this way. We're not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners.

The apostle Paul makes this point when he speaks of Christians before their conversion, saying we "were by nature children of wrath, just as the others" (Eph. 2:3). It's a matter of what we are by nature, not by example and imitation, that brings us under God's wrath.

It's important to understand this because many people believe that children sin merely because they learn sin from others. They argue that if we can somehow shelter them early from bad examples, they will not learn to sin. While there is much to be gained by sheltering a child, this view doesn't explain how children who have had good influences have grown up and become wicked.

I think most people realize that even small children do things that are not good. The issue is determining when a child's behavior can be considered sinful.

Some Christian parents are naïve at this point. They begin with the assumption that children are born perfect. Then they go to great lengths to reinforce this. Early on, when the child begins to display sinful behavior like selfishness and rage, they say, "Oh, he's only little. He doesn't know any better."

But how do you then determine when those actions become sinful? At what point does my son's act of hitting his sister become sin? At age two? Three?

If you decide to determine this by age, then what criteria do you use to determine the age? And how do you know you're right? This leads to even more questions. For example, can his actions be free of sin the day before his birthday but sinful the day after?

Saying the child "can't help it" doesn't solve the problem either. It confirms that he has a deeper problem. When little people can't help doing bad things, we should be concerned about what's causing it, not how to excuse it.

And we have excuses at every stage of a child's life. When they get bigger and commit bigger sins, parents say, "he just fell in with the wrong crowd." It never occurs to them that all the parents of the children in the "wrong crowd" are saying the same thing. Nor does it occur to them that Junior got in with the wrong crowd because he wanted to.

Could it be we know deep down that to call our children sinful will somehow reflect on us? We're still in denial about our own sin. It shouldn't surprise us that we deny our children's.

I see this denial all the time. When people are brought face to face with sin in their children, they tend to shift blame. "He only stole that because you left it right in front of him." Or the classic excuse, "He just fell in with the wrong crowd." When a teenage girl gets pregnant, we minimize it by saying, "she had an accident," as though she slipped and fell into bed with someone.

Wouldn't it be better just to see all this as sin early on and deal with it then? Wouldn't it be better if children saw their need for a Savior as soon as possible? Wouldn't this give us the opportunity to take advantage of those early years when the child's heart is tender and will easily bend?

Then if they grow up and get involved in more serious sins, at least we can be consistent. We won't say, "He's a good kid. He just has a problem with stealing cars."

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