

## **“BEHOLD, THE SECOND WOE”!**

Just last night while sitting in a meeting, I looked over to see a young mother struggling with her small child. He seemed determined to make her life as miserable as possible—and destroy her reputation in the process. She had the “Why me?” look on her tired face. He kept defiantly throwing his bottle on the floor (assisted by her picking it up and handing it back to him) and making angry noises that forced the preacher to scream louder and louder. With threats of increasingly embarrassing displays, he forced her to put him down on the floor where he proceeded to audition for circus clown while insisting on procuring a neighbor’s property. When she tried to prevent his thievery and rescue the stolen goods, he kicked his feet like an eggbeater and screamed his protest.

It was enough to make you believe the Devil started out as an infant. I am just thankful that one-year-olds don’t weigh two-hundred pounds, or a lot more mothers would be victims of homicide. It causes one to understand where the concept of a “sinful nature” originated.

The mother knows the child shouldn’t be acting like this; but due to the child’s limited intellectual development, she feels helpless. Older children and adults have their actions constrained by many mental and social factors. This child is not affected by peer-pressure, threat of embarrassment or rejection. His life is one of unlimited, unrestrained self-indulgence.

The parents are waiting for the child’s understanding to develop so they can correct “bad” behavior. They helplessly watch while selfishness and meanness of spirit grow behind a wall of undeveloped understanding.

What is the driving force in this child, and how can it be conquered? We need to understand some things about the nature of a child in order to institute appropriate training.

## **GOD-GIVEN SELF-CENTEREDNESS**

For the purpose of moral development, God created us to exist in a constant condition of need and dependence. The needs are most apparent in the small child. He needs food, warmth, companionship, entertainment, and a dry diaper. God has endowed him with strong, involuntary compulsions to taste, smell, hear, with eyes to see, and a desire to touch and feel.

The desires and passions in the infant are not yet complete. As he matures, he will find himself possessed of ever-increasing natural desires for things “*pleasant to the eyes,*” things “*good for food*” and for those things that will “*make one wise.*” His growing humanity will give way to a desire to build, to know, to be appreciated, recognized, to succeed, be a lover, and to survive in a secure state.

As infants grow, they learn to manipulate their surroundings to their own gratification. A smile, a grunt, kicking the feet, rolling and shaking the head, crying, screaming—“Pick me up—Feed me— Just look at me—Doesn’t anyone realize I have urgent needs?— What could be more important than ‘me’?”

The infant’s world is no bigger than his needs. It is the only reality he knows. He soon learns that his “wants” can be just as readily satisfied. The infant cannot think in terms of duty, responsibility or moral choice. He has no pride or humility—only desire. He comes, he sees, he takes. He is created that way. By nature, he is incapable of considering the needs of others. The baby doesn’t know you are tired and also in need of comfort.

The self-centeredness of infants and small children has all the appearances of a vice. But they are acting on natural, God-given impulses to the meeting of natural needs. They “*go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies (Psalm 58:3).*” Yet, God does not impute the lie to them as sin. God reckons as if they had no moral character, and therefore no responsibility. They do not possess the intellectual and moral maturity to say “No” to appetites. They cannot yet be deemed blameworthy. They begin life in innocent self-centeredness.

## **TO BLAME OR NOT TO BLAME**

As the child gets older, say eight- to twelve-months, the adults begin to pay less attention to his demands, and a weaning process begins. The child is made to wait, told “No,” and given boundaries. He must learn that he cannot always be first. If by now training has not already subdued the manifestations of his “selfishness,” the child may come to be what we called “spoiled.”

Guilty, frustrated parents are manipulated by the child’s whining and crying. The spatting begins. The kid gets jerked around. Resentment builds. The adults begin to blame him.

The child feels the tension, but does not lessen the demands. He connives, calculates and resorts to angry tantrums. I have seen a two-year-old take a weapon and angrily strike his mother. The young child is not matured to a point where he can understand responsibility, weigh values and make conscious decisions based on moral or social worth; but he sure can mimic the criminal mind.

## TOWARD UNDERSTANDING

What is happening? A short time ago, the adults around this child would have given him anything he wanted, including their own life-sustaining food; but now they are beginning to expect a little giving on his part. He doesn't want to give. Taking has been his way of life from conception. The arrangement suits him just fine.

We adults, sensing the capabilities of children, expect them to give-and-take at a level appropriate to their maturity. When they fall behind our expectations, we become irritated. They NEVER make a smooth transition from the utterly self-centered "give me, give me" mentality to assuming responsibility for some of their own needs.

We are delighted when the three-month-old grabs food from our hand and stuffs it in his mouth; but let a three-year-old try it and it is not so cute. We are delighted when a three-year-old interrupts our conversation with a tale of his own, but a nine-year-old is expected to say "Excuse me" and wait for an appropriate time to participate in the conversation.

When we believe a child has matured to point of being capable of responsible action, we automatically expect it of him. If he is slow to assume his duty, we become irritated with him for not "acting his age."

The beasts of the earth, in contrast to man, never need make a decision to deny natural drive. They are within their intended bounds living to self-gratification. But the growing child, as well as the adult, who doesn't rise above self-indulging desires is fallen from God's intention and design. The root of all sin is found in the runaway indulgence of God-given desires. Though, due to lack of moral development, the child is not held accountable, the unrestrained indulgences of his desires will be the very root that will one day result in his sinfulness.

## A SPIRITUAL FETUS

Life is designed by God to be a spiritual womb, a place where the work of creation continues. Yes, the physical creation is complete and He is rested from it; but the moral creation goes on. Men are not born wise, righteous, experienced, or developed in consciousness.

Adam and Eve were never incomplete physically or morally. The rest of us must grow through different stages to reach viability. A four-month fetus, still in the mother's womb, is a living soul. Though all the tiny members appear viable, the baby is an incomplete creation needing further growth before becoming distinct from its mother. In like manner, a three-year-old child has all the tiny features of a morally responsible adult—a knowledge of right and wrong, a sense of justice, accountability, conscience, duty, guilt, shame, etc. Yet, none of the moral faculties are developed to the point of being fully operative. The child is not a morally viable soul. He is an uncompleted moral being. He is not accountable. Morally, the three-year-old is still in the womb. As the child grows, he slowly makes a transition from no moral understanding to complete accountability. There are vast differences of opinion as to when God deems them accountable for their own actions and thoughts. Without any basis, twelve years old has been the traditional age. Biblically, it will be sometime before twenty years of age (*Deut. 1:39 with Num. 14:29-31*).

One thing I do know is that it is not an "age of accountability," but a "state of accountability" (*James 4:17; Lev. 5:3*). Maybe as early as five for some children. Maybe as late as fourteen for others. I don't know.

## THE DILEMMA

The dilemma parents face is: How do we relate to the child during this transition period from no moral understanding to complete accountability? When the child is 30% morally cognizant and 70% morally naive, how do we relate to him? How do we know

to what degree he is responsible? We know as far as judgment is concerned, God will not deem him blameworthy until all moral faculties are completely operative-until he becomes a morally viable being. But if the parent waits until the child can understand the need to exercise self-control, by then he has developed both a history and a habit of indulging his flesh to the full. The problem the parent must address is that the natural drives function a great while before the reason. The child's first learning experiences occur in a parent-supported, self-indulgent environment. It could not be otherwise.

The parent does not want to destroy the child's natural drives, but we would like to instill moderation. Yet, at an early age the child is incapable of choosing moderation.

## PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Here is where we come to the crux of this whole chapter and the background for this whole book. It is important to understand:

PARENTS MUST ASSUME THAT PART OF THE CHILD'S MORAL DUTY WHICH IS NOT YET FULLY DEVELOPED. The parents' role is not that of a policeman, but more like that of the Holy Spirit. When the child has his sails full of wind (strong drives), but no compass (moral discernment), the parents must be the navigator. When they are as yet incapable of

conviction, our training and example will be their “standards.” Before they can DECIDE to do good we must CONDITION them to do good. There was a time when the mother breathed for the child, ate for the child and handled his waste. Likewise, in the moral realm, until the child’s reason and moral faculties develop to the point of independent operation, the parent must be the voice of his yet unborn conscience, his initiative and his set of values.

Each day he gets closer to his birth into moral individuality. Someday his spiritual heart will function without you. He will leave the protection of your sanctification and stand alone in the light of his own conscience (*1 Cor 7:14*). Until maturity, the only moderation the child will know is what the parents instill.

The parent must understand his role in the moral weaning of the child. One day, he or she is going to be able to choose. No amount of training is going to override the certainty of sin developing; but the training we give can make it easier for repentance to follow sinful indulgence.

In the infant and young child, we do not deal with their “selfishness” as sin, but we are aware of where it is headed. Drives, which are not in themselves evil, nonetheless form the occasion to all sin. Our training must take into consideration the evil that a self-willed spirit will eventually bring.

We parents cannot impart righteousness to our children, but we can develop in them a firm commitment to righteousness. We cannot write the law on their hearts, but we can write the law and gospel on their consciences.

Anticipating this development and its consequences places an urgent sense of responsibility upon us. The world is an undertow pulling our children to destruction. Looking at statistics alone, the probability is against their moral survival. The training we give and the wisdom we impart can make all the difference in the outcome. You hold an eternal soul in your hand. You cannot afford to give in to indifference, laziness, or careless neglect. It is the parents’ responsibility to determine what level of understanding a child has and to hold him accountable at that level.

This is an almost impossible task if you depend on your intellect alone. If you are the principal caretaker of your child, your heart will be able to discern the world from his perspective. When the child believes it is wrong, it is wrong (*James 4:17*). Where there is moral understanding and he disobeys, he should be punished with the rod. Where there is lack of understanding of the moral quality of his actions, he should be trained and conditioned. Sometimes the rod is used in training. More will be said about this later.

## **WHEN DRIVES ISSUE IN SIN**

When does this innocent, natural selfishness of a child become sin? In other words, when is a child to blame? Keep in mind that a youth will not come under condemnation until his moral faculties are fully operative.

As the child’s reason and moral faculties develop, gradually there evolves an understanding of moral responsibility and duty. At some point (as moral perception grows to a point where one can be held fully accountable), every youth faces his own “*tree of knowledge of good and evil.*” (*See Deut. 1:39.*) So far, everyone (except Jesus) has “eaten” (personally violated his own God-given understanding of right and wrong) resulting in personal condemnation.

Though God will not condemn a child until he is completely matured morally (grows into a state of accountability), that does not mean that the developing child is incapable of moral judgments and responses. When a child sins against his conscience, he is guilty. The degree to which his understanding is developed is the degree to which his actions can be called sin. Again, the sin is not imputed until the child becomes a fully functioning moral being. An unfinished clock, still in the making, may have moving parts, but it will not keep time until every last piece is properly installed.

## **WALKING AFTER THE FLESH**

The cause of this consistent failure to obey the law of God is the flesh-body in need of gratification. [After indulging in sin, it is called “*sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3),*”—that is, flesh “full” of sin.] As the body of flesh was the occasion of Eve’s sin and the occasion of Christ’s temptation, so it is the occasion of your child’s development into selfishness—which, at maturity, will constitute sin.

When the child’s conscience is partially operative, he must be trained to practice self-restraint. For, if a child is allowed to violate his budding conscience, and continues to do so as it grows to full maturity, he will find himself already fully given over to his flesh on the first day of his awakening into accountability.

That part of the child that is awakened to moral duty should be brought into complete subjection to parents, and the child should be led to worship God (*1 Sam. 1:28; 3:1; with 3:7*). If you allow the flesh to run its natural course, the child will be possessed of many unruly passions and lusts long before he is cognizant enough to assume responsibility.

## **IN MY HANDS**

The clay formed into a vessel of dishonor was marred while in the potter's hand, only to be remade into a vessel of honor fit for the master's table. If God is the potter and your child is the clay, for a little while you are the wheel on which the clay is turned. As Adam and Eve were given a garden to dress and keep, you have been given loan of a little heart and mind to dress and keep.

There will come a time when your children must stand alone before "*the tree of knowledge of good and evil.*" As the purpose of God has permitted, inevitably they will partake of the forbidden fruit. Now, in the developing years, you can make a difference in how they will respond after they have "eaten."

All the events of daily life, coupled with inner discernment, are laying a foundation of knowledge from which your child will make judgments about right and wrong. Somewhere on that road, each child will round a bend and, with the dawning, perceive his or her responsibility, duty and accountability to God. They will then be "without excuse."

## **A DIVINE CALLING**

With this understanding, we can better appreciate what is taking place in our developing child. Just as the child Jesus grew in wisdom and knowledge, so your child is going through a growth of understanding. The holy Scriptures are able to make him "*wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15).*" You must prepare your child to save himself from this "*untoward generation (Acts 2:40).*" God has a prototype for the finished product. It is that we might be "*conformed to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29).*" We parents work with God toward the day when our children will be conformed to "*the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ (Eph. 4:13).*" The promise of God is still operative: "*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it (Prov.22:6).*"