

After Its Kind, and then some

When I see orange, the same shade as the fruit, I experience an involuntary citrus constriction in my jaw muscles. Likewise, when Autumn breezes bring the smell of hickory wood smoke, it makes me feel good all over. On the other hand, when I see a chalk board, I feel pained and anxious. I know I am going to be called forward to write my spelling words for the entire third grade class. These involuntary responses are the result of prior conditioning.

I recently received a letter from a mother who told of her little girl's conditioning to potty when she hears the sound made by a certain crib toy. The Mother does not know how it happened, but somehow the child came to associate the sound of the toy with the release of her bladder. (I think she said the child was six months old.) The mother is now trying to use this happenstance conditioning to induce the child to go on the potty instead of in her crib.

Where smaller children are concerned, conditioning is a powerful tool. It can work both ways. All children are conditioned to respond to stimuli. It is inevitable. I have been in homes where the children went joyously nuts upon hearing Daddy driving up at the end of his work day. Later in life, without knowing why, they will still experience a leap of the heart when a car pulls into the driveway. Children, dreading the sound of a car bringing home an abusive father, will grow up to feel anxious at the sound of a car in the driveway.

When parents make it a habit to pacify their emotionally disturbed or bored children with a pacifier, the children grow up learning to cope by enacting the sucking motion. When they get a little older they are pacified by having a cracker or sucker stuck in their mouths. The parents purchase peace by teaching their children to indulge their lusts to satisfy their feelings. Rather than learn self-control, they are channeled into lack of control. The children are thus conditioned to resort to eating as the answer to all stress, anxiety, and boredom. In other words, they are conditioned to eat. This not only generates lack of self-control in eating but produces a general approach to life that is one of indulgence and intemperance. The first sin of Adam and Eve involved putting something in their mouths. Christ's first temptation was an inducement to provide bread for his hunger. The mouth is the central focus of the lust of the flesh.

Your child is not evil in his desire to indulge, anymore than a dog is evil when he eats meat until he regurgitates. But dogs never grow into moral duty, as do children. Their reason never develops to the point of holding values higher than the instinct for survival and bodily pleasure. The child is designed to become more than a mammal seeking survival. The animal takes and devours with no thought to the needs of others. Children are destined by their Creator to mature to a plane of understanding and commitment wherein the passions are voluntarily subjected to the higher principles of the mind. It takes moral maturity to ignore even strong appetites and passions in favor of values deemed to be of more worth than gratification. To voluntarily lay aside one's gratification, and that for the blessing and benefit of others, is humanity at its finest. Indeed, true humanity is not found at the table, but at the altar—laying down one's

rights and pleasures for love of others. God created us to be givers, not takers. The more costly the giving, the higher the humanity. The stronger the passion resisted, the deeper the soul of the man. Humanity increases in proportion to the difference between the strength of the pull of the flesh and the strength of soul to resist pure animal indulgence.

The end of the struggle between the flesh and the spirit is character—be it good or bad. History has revealed that all have fallen short of living up to his or her own aspirations to overcome selfish, bodily indulgences. There is nothing glorious about humanity indulging. The Bible says, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).” Certainly the sinfulness of man is clearly revealed in our willingness to indulge on the animal level. It is an ugly sight to see a parent ignoring, or even promoting, the child’s indulgence. The cute, curly headed, little darling grows into a puffy, pouting, flesh parading, pile of inhumanity.

Parent, only you can save your children from that early conditioning toward unrestrained indulgence. We will not be able to condition them into being Saints, but we can certainly condition them to sufficient self-control and self-respect that when the time comes they will be more responsive to the call of God to repentance and faith.

The adult, when sufficiently motivated, can lean on his intelligence or his sense of values and override his early conditioning, but the child is not so developed in reason and self-reflection as to be able to make a decision purely on the basis of what he ought to do. The sluggard, the glutton, the thief, and the sexual pervert, to name a few, are children who grew up to have an adult’s capacity for indulgence while retaining the child’s lack of self-restraint.

When your children are only days old, begin watching for signs of their seeking to manipulate their environment to their gratification. At that age, all needs and desires are legitimate. But after several months they will learn ways to manipulate their environment to not only meet needs but wants as well. They will need to be fed, but they also need to learn to wait. They need to be held and cuddled, but you should not allow the child to always dictate the time and place. They will need attention, but they should not be allowed to grow up thinking that they can command the center of attention. Children will be more secure if you condition them to be patient and exercise self-control. Cause them to learn the meaning of the word *wait*. They should be able to accept a “No” without complaint. If you tell them “No,” and they whine, they are already manipulating you to their own gratification. You have allowed negative conditioning. A child should be taught to sit where placed, lie down and be quiet upon command, and eat the food they are offered. To allow children to do only what they want to do is to cultivate the animal and to starve the human development.

I do not intend this to justify the hard, overriding, autocratic rule of some parents. Our job as parents is not to bear down with an autocratic spirit. We are not breaking a bad dog, we are nurturing a tender, developing plant. If you become nervous, anxious, and irritable, you will damage the delicate fruit. Children must be handled with kind, patient, loving hands.

As a parent—as an adult—you are still possessed of the natural passions and appetites that began even before birth. Your flesh lusts against your spirit. You know

what you should do. Conscience speaks with a voice louder than our excuses. You may blame your parents for the bad programming. And they may well be the initial cause of some of your hang-ups. But you are now possessed of a mind and a spirit that is much the superior of your passions. Different from a child, you can choose to not yield to your weaknesses. Love of food, alcohol, and tobacco, or vanity of possessions, or bitterness of spirit may be more important to you than right doing, but you are absolutely free and able to step away from your early conditioning.

If a long history of self-will and indulgence has left your soul callused and your will weakened, you may say with the Apostle Paul, “for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not (Romans 7:18).” As an adult, you are not to blame for your moral weaknesses, but you are to blame for giving in to them. Moral helplessness is unwillingness of desire, not inability of faculties. If your children are to rise above selfishness, you must show them the way.

If you are a born-again Christian, you have been freed from all that you were in the old self. When Christ died, you died with him (Rom. 6:1-14). By faith you are now free from sin. You are no longer the “old man” conditioned to indulge. You are a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17), old things are passed away, all things are new. If you walk after the Spirit, you will not live after your lusts (Gal. 5:16).

In conclusion, if you walk after your lusts it is because you choose to, but your children have no choice. Until they are old enough to know good from evil (Deut. 1:39), your responsibility is to function as your child’s conscience and will. You must determine to train and condition them to a life of self-control and temperance. If you wait until they are old enough to understand their duty, they will already have a history of being totally given over to the flesh. Condition them now to be self-controlled and temperate in all things, and they will not bring into their Christian life a whole mess of twisted responses against which they must struggle. Parent, repent and lay hold of the freedom that is yours in Christ. Give your children a better start than you had. You are their only hope.