

Common Parent Traps

Scripture: Luke 9:23; Ephesians 6:1–4; Colossians 3:20–21

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If you've been a parent for any time at all, it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that your child came into the world with an insatiable faculty for evil. Even before birth, your baby's little heart was already programmed for sin and selfishness. The inclination toward depravity is such that, given free reign, every baby has the potential to become a monster.

Original sin is the biblical doctrine that explains your child's sinful proclivity. It means children do not come into the world seeking God and righteousness. They do not even come into the world with a neutral innocence. They come into the world seeking the fulfillment of sinful and selfish desires. Scripture also teaches a doctrine called total depravity, referring to the extent of original sin. Although the outworking of the sin nature does not necessarily attain full expression in everyone's behavior, it is nonetheless called total depravity because there is no aspect of the human personality, character, mind, emotions, or will that is free from the corruption of sin or immune to sin's enticements.

Put bluntly, sin is not learned—it is an inbred disposition. Your kids got their sinful nature from you, you got it from your parents, your parents got it from their parents, and so on, all the way back to Adam. In other words, Adam's fall tainted the entire human race with sin. Both the guilt and the corruption of sin are universal. The apostle Paul wrote, "Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12, emphasis added). "Through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men" (Romans 5:18), meaning we inherited the guilt of sin. And "through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (Romans 5:19), meaning we inherited the corruption of sin. No one is exempt. No one is born truly innocent.

That means that left to themselves, your children will pursue a course of sin. And left entirely to themselves, there is no evil of which they are incapable. You may find that hard to swallow, especially when you see them as newborns. Infants seem to be the very epitome of chaste, precious, childlike innocence. But don't let the cute cheeks, the playful coos, and the bright eyes fool you—those children are a miniature version of you! The depravity that lives in their hearts is just waiting for the opportunity to express itself.

So how should the doctrines of original sin and total depravity impact your parenting? Before I answer that, let me show you three parenting approaches that miss the mark.

Trap #1: Focusing on Behavior

Many parents go off track by focusing all their efforts on controlling their child's behavior. Be careful. If you concentrate all your energies on correcting external behavior, or staving off misbehavior with threats of discipline, you may be doing little more than training a hypocrite.

I've seen that happen repeatedly. I know Christian parents who think their parenting is successful

because they've taught their children to act politely on cue, to answer with "Yes, Sir" and "No, Ma'am," and to speak to adults when spoken to. While that kind of behavior control may appear to work wonders for a time (especially when the parents are nearby), it does not address the root problem of depravity. Sinful behavior is a symptom of a sinful heart.

Trap #2: Focusing on Environment

Other parents try to control their child's environment. They attempt to build a cocoon around their kids to isolate them from bad influences. They restrict their children's exposure to television, ban popular music from the home, and sometimes forbid contact with children whose parents may not share their same parenting philosophy.

While I do think you should shield your kids from the experience of evil, you need to teach them to be wise and discerning when confronted with evil. They won't learn those lessons if they are completely isolated. The isolationist approach merely produces naïve children who are gullible and vulnerable, defenseless in the world.

Try as you might, you won't be able to isolate your children forever. When the day comes that they venture out into the world, they need to be prepared with discernment skills and wisdom to detect and resist the enticements of the devil and the world. If you choose to shield them from an evil environment, you are ignoring the enemy within them — a depraved heart. But if you win the heart, you win the child.

Trap #3: Focusing on Self-Esteem

A very prevalent approach today is to build a child's self-esteem. That method assumes that if a child sees himself as good, noble, and wonderful, he'll not only behave better, but he will also treat others better. This method turns self-love into a virtue.

The truth is that much of the modern effort to spark kids' self-esteem is simply pouring gasoline on a runaway fire. It encourages already selfish kids to think they are justified in wanting their own way. It makes you as a parent think you have to defer to the child, no matter what, because the child has a right to express himself freely, so he feels good about himself. All of that only escalates out-of-control behavior and feeds the worst tendencies of human depravity. Want to ensure that your child will become a delinquent? Feed his self-esteem and then compound the problem by refusing to correct him when he is wrong.

Self-esteem is based on an unbiblical perspective that denies original sin and the doctrine of total depravity. The Bible has nothing positive to say about self-esteem, self-love, or any other variety of self-centeredness. It teaches your child to deny himself, not love himself (Luke 9:23).

The Right Approach: Focusing on the Heart

There's only one remedy for your child's inborn depravity: the new birth—regeneration. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit... [Therefore,] you must be born again" (John 3:6-7). "Born of the flesh" with a sinful bent, your children have no power to free themselves from sin's bondage. They lack the Holy Spirit and thus have no

capacity to please God or obey Him from the heart (cf. Romans 8:7-8). Until your children are born again, they are dead in “trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

So your top priority as a parent is to be an evangelist in your home. You need to teach your children the law of God, show them their need for a Savior, and point them to Jesus Christ as the only One who can save them. If they grow up in your home without a keen awareness of their need for salvation, you have failed as a parent in your primary task as their spiritual leader. Teach them the gospel and ask God to perform His sovereign work of regeneration.

One word of caution about that—if you try to force, coerce, or manipulate your kids into a profession of faith, you may pressure them into making a false profession. The new birth is a work of the Holy Spirit, and your child’s salvation is a matter that must ultimately be settled between him and God.

Don’t approach parenting by focusing on the symptoms rather than the heart. If you attempt to modify your children’s behavior, isolate them, or bolster their self-esteem, you will not only exacerbate the problem, you will fail to reach to the heart of the matter. But if you teach them about their sin and need for the Savior, and if you live a life that models what you are teaching them to be, you can rest your hope in God’s grace for the salvation of your children.

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