

CHAPTER 3

Solving the Puzzle of Difficult Behavior

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

— Matthew 19:14 (NIV)

As the disciples looked out over the gathering crowd of children, with their soil-smudged little faces and hands, they must have been dismayed. After all, Jesus was on a mission to establish his father’s kingdom, so there was little time to spend (or waste) with the children whose mothers had brought them in hopes of seeing and being blessed by Jesus.

In Scripture, scenes like this often conjure in our minds a picture of children sitting patiently, each quiet and neatly dressed, as they wait their turn for a few moments with Jesus. No doubt you have seen the Sunday school paintings depicting the meek and mild Jesus sitting with calm children gathered around listening attentively. But if the children that were brought to Jesus were like most, and certainly they were, it is just as likely they were running, jumping and playing. In other words, they were being regular kids. In fact, I suspect that many of them were being less than saintly, only serving to further the disciples’ frustration.

There is a reason (maybe several reasons) that Matthew seems to go out of his way to record this brief scene in his gospel account. He tells us that the disciples rebuked those who brought the children to Jesus, obviously intent on “protecting” Jesus from this unruly crowd of little ones who the disciples saw as merely a distraction from the important business Jesus had to do. So imagine their confusion when Jesus insisted that the children come to him, and having blessed them declared that the kingdom belonged to “such as these.” The disciples could not see past the children’s behavior, their lowly status and their simple humanity. Jesus, however, could not help but look beyond these things to see their preciousness, their potential and their childlike faith.

Seeing Beyond the Obvious

Examples such as this were commonplace during the earthly ministry of Jesus. He was never content to deal merely on the surface of things, focusing on the obvious and outward. He understood that what lay beneath the surface was what really mattered. The change Jesus sought, and the change that he knew

people needed, started at the center (their heart) and transformed them, sometimes albeit slowly, from the inside out.

The same challenge and opportunity exists for parents. It is often difficult, sometimes seemingly impossible, to see beyond our children's behaviors. And yet, that is exactly what children—particularly those from hard places—need for us to do. Our children desperately need parents who can see beyond their behaviors to the real child that is locked inside a fortress of fear, confusion and shame.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that “seeing beyond” our children's behaviors is not the same as overlooking behaviors that are unhealthy, unacceptable and hold them back. Some parents at this point may be tempted to respond, “How can we just let our children get away with bad behavior? Isn't it our responsibility to teach them right and wrong and to discipline them accordingly?” The answer is certainly yes, but as we seek to do this it is important that we remain focused on the primary goal.

In this sense, every parent needs to answer the fundamental question “What is my primary goal?” Is it merely to achieve good or right behavior? If so, this focus will largely shape how we as parents approach our children and the interactions we have with them (specifically, how we approach connecting and correcting). But if our primary goal is to build a strong and healthy relationship—a connection with our children that serves as a strong foundation and enables them to develop trust, heal from past wounds and experience a deep sense of felt safety, self-worth and empowerment—then our approach and interactions will likely look different. I believe this is God's goal for us—that we grow deeper in our relationship with Him (Matthew 22:37) and from that our desires, thoughts and actions begin to reflect the character of His Son. Likewise, we believe that our kids need, and almost every parent desires, this kind of strong foundation of connection. The key, therefore, is to not allow your child's bad behavior to distract you from building this foundation that will allow true healing and growth to occur.

Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- 1. Do you find it difficult at times to “see beyond” your child's behaviors? Why or why not?**
- 2. What is your primary goal as a parent? How does your relationship with your child, particularly in terms of how you handle connecting and correcting, reflect or correspond to this goal?**
- 3. What tends to distract you as a parent from achieving this goal?**

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Turning again to Jesus as our guide, we find that he never excused or condoned behavior that “missed the mark.” But we also discover that he seldom lectured, scolded or preached at those who were hurting and in need of help and healing. Instead, he often looked beyond the surface to the “root cause” in order to offer true hope. We must also be willing to do the same with our children. No example better illustrates this than the Samaritan woman’s life-changing encounter with Jesus at Jacob’s well.

As recorded in the fourth chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well is instructive for us as parents as we deal with our children’s behaviors. The woman’s failures were clear and apparently well known, but looking beyond the obvious Jesus knew that the woman’s sin pointed to a much deeper problem. Given the number and nature of her relationships we can speculate that she was trying to fill some void in her life. Ironically, much like many children from hard places, this woman clearly was seeking a close, connected relationship, but her behaviors were actually preventing her from finding what she sought. Many of our children desperately want to be loved, to feel that they have worth and to feel connected, yet their pain is so deep, the void so large and the confusion so great that they often act in ways that inhibit rather than promote the very thing they desire. Similarly, we also see this with children who act out and seemingly sabotage themselves even as things start to move in a positive direction.

Thankfully, but not surprisingly, we find Jesus interacting with the Samaritan woman in a way that offered her lasting hope and the fulfillment of her deepest needs. While never once condoning or ignoring her behavior, he kept his focus clearly on helping her find what she truly needed—a relationship and a connection that would change her from the inside out. In the same way, our children need to understand God’s love for them and the hope that is offered through Jesus Christ, even as they desperately need to experience that love expressed in tangible and practical ways through us.

Seeing the Real Child

By Dr. Karyn Purvis

In spite of our devotion to the Lord, even in our good intentions and clarity of mind, we will at times fail to see the true needs of our child and what is needed most from us as parents. After speaking at an adoption support group in a local church, I was approached by a woman who had responded to God’s call to adopt. A faithful believer, sincerely seeking to hear from God and follow as He led, she had come to the group looking for answers but seemingly could find none for herself or her child.

Inna was adopted from an orphanage when she was 11 years old, and her mother was frustrated to tears by her daughter’s behaviors. “She is so manipulative; I don’t know what to do with her! She calls me every day from school saying she wants me to pick her up. She expects me to drive to school and pick her up and drive her home. She claims she is afraid. Her manipulation is driving me crazy. After all, my (biological) daughter went to the same school and rode her bike back and forth every day without complaining or ever calling me to come pick her up. I just cannot understand why Inna can’t do the same.”

Sadly, Inna’s mother was blinded by her daughter’s frustrating and perplexing behaviors. She could not see past them to recall the cruel experiences of Inna’s first 11 years of life. As we talked, I

asked Inna’s mother to recount for me what those early years entailed for Inna. After listening carefully, I gently reminded this loving mother that while her biological daughter had been loved and adored, fed nourishing meals and played with carefree abandon, little Inna, abandoned at birth, had struggled daily for scraps of food. For years the only human attention she received was as the sexual “pet” of the orphanage workers. A beautiful child, Inna was abused day and night by male and female attendants.

No doubt Inna exhibited these troubling behaviors and others that were frustrating to her mother, but they were behaviors born of fear. The fear of riding a bike in the strange neighborhood was a terrifying experience for her and pointed to something much bigger.

“Could I give you another option?” I continued. “Would you consider telling Inna that you will walk her to school every morning and meet her after school every day to walk her home. Tell her she can walk with you or ride her bike beside you. Tell her you will walk her to and from school as long as she needs you to. It may take a week. It may take a month. It may take a year. But sooner or later Inna will ask you to let her try it alone, and in the process, you will have won her heart because you will have built trust and helped her understand that she is safe.

Key Scripture Verses

No doubt many of us have read countless times the great “love passage” in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. But I wonder how many of us have ever read these words with our child’s difficult and challenging behaviors fresh in our mind? Take a few minutes to read and meditate on the verses below (or better yet, read all of 1 Corinthians 13) from your perspective as a parent of a child who, at times, may be very difficult to connect with.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

—1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (NIV)

Defining Love in Ways Our Children Can Understand

No one would argue that our children—maybe especially our children—need love. The question (and the challenge) for us as parents is whether we have learned to define that love and are prepared to express it in practical ways they can understand and truly experience. In other words, have we learned to “translate” our love into actions and a way of relating that will bring about connection, healing and transformation, or are we speaking a “foreign” love language that our children are not equipped to interpret, understand and receive?

The real question for us as followers of Christ and those who have been called to the children we now love and serve is “Are we allowing the Spirit of God to do this work in and through us?” Keeping

our children's history fully in mind, we need to ask ourselves, "Is our love patient, is it kind, is it self-seeking, is it easily angered, does it keep a record of wrongs, does it always protect, always hope and always persevere? Does our love fail?"

Undoubtedly we will fall short far too often in consistently speaking and living a "love language" that connects with our children in this deeply transforming way. But we all must recognize that what we have been called to is a journey, and we are not meant to travel it alone. God has provided us with helpful resources, insightful people, one another and ultimately His Word and His Spirit as companions and guides for this journey. As we continue to faithfully travel with our children toward healing and wholeness, let us pray that we become increasingly those who, by God's Spirit, are led to love our children as we ourselves are loved by God.

More Questions to Consider and Discuss:

- 1. What behaviors does your child exhibit that hide the "real child" (i.e., the preciousness and potential of your child that may be "masked" by your child's behaviors)?**
- 2. What characteristics do you believe your child possesses that are "hidden" beneath those behaviors?**
- 3. Think about your recent interactions with your child. How do those interactions look like the kind of love that Paul describes? How do those interactions fall short of that kind of love?**
- 4. What are some specific things that you can do to better live out the kind of love that Paul is describing, even in the face of your child's bad behavior?**