



From Coping to Cure

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LESSON 9:

AT WHAT AGE IS IT ACCEPTABLE TO SULK WHEN YOU CAN'T HAVE WHAT YOU WANT?

THOUGHT STARTER:

Why do adults behave childishly?

Where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?

1 Corinthians 3:3, NKJV

I was sitting alone in a living room, waiting for the man of the house to appear. Instead, a door opened and in walked a small boy. He walked over to where I was sitting and asked me some pointed questions:

"Who are you?"

"What do you want here?"

"Have you got any children?"

"I have a dog. Do you like dogs?"

"Do your children have a train like mine?"

I had my mind on the reason for my being there, so these questions were distracting me. I tried to think of some way to get his attention away from me, and all I could think of was to give him my billfold to play with.

Immediately I saw that this decision was a mistake. He began to extract my credit cards and money. I needed to redeem my billfold.

My first approach was to ask him to return it in as nice a voice as possible. "Would you please give me my billfold?"

He replied, "That's my billfold."

A simple, childlike transaction. I had no other choice but to take it away from him. In my mind, I needed to be calm, cool, and collected for my appointment, so I needed to bring this encounter with a three-year-old to a swift conclusion. I retrieved my billfold, put the credit cards and paper money in place, and pocketed the billfold. But my little friend was determined to retrieve "his" billfold. He approached me with a smile on his face and in a pleasant voice, he said, "Please, mister, can I have my billfold back?"

With such a sweet request, I felt quite mean and inconsiderate, but I replied, "No, that's my billfold."

"Can't I please have it back? Please, Mister? Please can I have it back?" he pleaded, still smiling.

I was almost persuaded to give it back to him, but I got a firmer grip on my resolve and said as gently as possible, "No, you can't have it."

As if by magic, this nice, polite, friendly, little boy turned into someone else. His smile was gone. His eyes became slits, he stomped his feet, his little hands doubled up into fists, and in a shrill voice, he shouted, "I want my billfold!"

I said, "No!"

Then he started to cry. Tears streaming down his cheeks, he looked utterly pathetic.

He wailed, "I want my billfold."

I said, "No!"

Finally, he gave me an ugly look and turned his back on me.

He was pouting.

I was getting the silent treatment. He acted as though I was non-existent. At that point, his father showed up and the incident with the child was over. Later, I had some free time and began to relive that scene.

Small children have some very effective tools to get what they are after. The tools can be charming: smiling, reaching out for a hug or sweet talk; they can also be deceptively charming: rolling their eyes, yelling, screaming, crying, or pouting. Childlike behavior can be very effective.

There are two definitions for the word *charm*. One is the expression of genuine pleasure, delight, pleasantry, and gratitude. The other is to deceive and pretend pleasure, delight, pleasantry and gratitude to allure, entice, captivate. In either case,

the behavior is the same; the motive is quite different.

I have parents approach me because their child is five years old and clearly still uses deceptive charm (as the three-year-old who approached me) to get what they are after. At what age is it no longer acceptable to use pretended pleasantries for personal gain? Would you say ten, twenty, or forty years old?

We were having lunch with an elderly couple. Their ten-year-old grandchild approached the table. She was all smiles and charm. With her back to Grandpa and hugging Grandma, I heard her whisper in Grandma's ear, "Grandma, can I have a dollar"?

The grandma said, "No, not now."

Then she turned around with her back to Grandma and gave Grandpa a hug and a kiss and told him she loved him. He was noticeably pleased by her attention. Then she asked him for a dollar. He gladly responded. She gave him another hug and kiss and declared her love for him; she gave Grandma a big smile, and was gone. She'd gotten her dollar.

My three-year-old friend's actions in attempting to acquire my billfold and the ten-year-old's success in charming Grandpa out of a dollar start out to be childish self-interest. But this behavior works so well that it often is continued into adult life.

CHILDISH BEHAVIOR ISN'T JUST FOR CHILDREN

At what age is it no longer acceptable to throw a tantrum when you can't have what you want? I was lecturing a man in his forties about being a more considerate husband. He was a college graduate and a successful businessman. He nodded, approving of what I was saying—I *thought*.

Suddenly, he stood up and shouted, "I've had enough of this. I don't have to pay for this stuff. I don't need to put up with this lecture!" He wheeled around, opened the door and left, slamming the door so hard the pictures on the walls moved.

Whew!

What happened?

He had a tantrum.

Ten minutes later, the phone rang. It was he, apologizing for his behavior. This is what psychologists call *regressive behavior*: acting like a five-year-old. Why do we continue such behavior? One reason is that an individual believes it still works. Another reason is that anger and wrath are part of our sinful nature.

At what age is it acceptable to cry when you can't have what you want? A woman sits down for a meeting with me, opens her purse, and takes out a tiny handkerchief. When this happens, I can predict that this woman will cry before the hour is up. Sure enough, I will say something she doesn't like. At that point, an amazing thing happens: She will produce one tear from each eye. Not two tears, but one. This is her signal for me to back away from the subject we are on, or perhaps to let me know that I have said something she doesn't like. It is remarkable how long a tear can be suspended in the corner of her eye, but eventually it will trickle down her cheek. At that point she will whisk it away with a practiced hand.

Let me assure you that I am not referring to tears of sorrow or grief or loneliness or real guilt. I refer to the use of tears as a tool to manipulate others so one can get his or her own way. Why do people continue such behavior into adult life? Because it has worked successfully in the past. Another reason is that selfishness is part of our sinful nature.

At what age is it acceptable to pout when you can't have what you want? I talked with a couple struggling with both temper tantrums and pouting. Their large home was the scene of much conflict. He wished she were more orderly; she wished he were less rigid. One day he flew into a rage over her closet, demanding that she get it organized. Then he slammed the door, got into his car, and took off, spinning the wheels of his car as he went.

The silence continued for three days. She pouted in response to his tantrum. She would teach him not to yell at her and make demands she refused to meet. This interaction between them had been going on for many years.

Why do adults sulk when they can't have what they want? Because it worked in the past and it still works for them. Another reason is that anger, rebellion, and selfishness are part of our sinful nature.

Paul wrote to some young Christians that he could not treat them as grown-up spiritual people. He pointed out that they were missing out on the happiness that comes with living lives when Christ is in control. They were missing personality qualities such as:

. . . love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23, NKJV)

According to the Bible, the only way to actually acquire these qualities as part of your being is to recognize that you don't have them unless God gives them to you. Your part is to allow the Holy Spirit to give you something you don't have.

"ARE YOU NOT CARNAL . . . ?"

Paul used the word *carnal*. We don't see or hear this word used today. Some modern

translations say "worldly," one "babes," another "fleshly." Paul said:

Where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:3, NKJV)

Envy, strife, and divisiveness hinder learning and appreciation of others. The apostle Paul calls them "mere men," rather than "spiritual men."

During a recent series of evangelistic meetings, a man with a beautiful singing voice invited Christ to take control of his life. He began attending a church. They soon discovered his fine voice and called on him to sing for some of the church services. Ironically, I had a counselee with a good voice who attended the same church. He was doing the male solo work until this new believer with the better voice came along. They shared vocal responsibilities. My counselee discovered envy and strife in his heart; he could not enjoy the beauty of this new convert's voice. He deeply resented the music director's decision to use the new singer. Several people who knew the situation sided with the music director. There was carnality—envy, strife, and division in my counselee's heart. There was no point in talking about spiritual life with him. He needed to be reminded of the most basic principles of the Christian life. This talented, successful man needed to be approached as if he were a child who knew nothing about the Lord.

As Paul put it:

I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it . . . (1 Corinthians 3:2, NKJV)

Once Jesus told His disciples:

**"I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now."
(John 16:12, KJV)**

Isaiah said to his people:

Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little. (Isaiah 28:9-10, KJV)

As children often do, my counselee struggled for a while; he wanted his singing position back. There were some tantrums, some weeping, some pouting. Finally, there was some repenting or changing of his mind. Today, he is being blessed by the fine singing voice of his vocal partner. Besides, he is chewing on some solid food.

If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. (Galatians 5:25, NKJV)

In order to develop spiritually, we must recognize any carnality or childish, sinful behavior that continues into adult life. Once the condition is discovered, only God can cure the situation. He alone can clean our hearts from envy, strife, divisions, pouting, temper tantrums, and deceptive manipulation of others. Then we can move on to the meat of the Christian life.

As Paul said,

**And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?
(1 Corinthians 3:1-3, NKJV)**

Lesson: No one with childish habit patterns can have successful long-term relationships.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Review the thought starter at the beginning of the chapter. What thoughts were started?
- Review the lead Bible verse. What does it say to you? Did you observe yourself in relation to the verse? Did you observe others in relation to the verse? Did you find any additional verses?
- What is your response to the lesson at the end of the chapter?

1. Why do adults behave childishly?
2. Define *deception*. What is the difference between deception and lying? How subtle can we be with deception?
3. How common is the practice of deception among adults?
4. Look up Isaiah 53:6. What is the common denominator among all of us according to this verse?
5. What can parents do to correct "childish behavior" in their children so that their children will not behave this way later as adults?

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