

A Change of Atmosphere in Relational Living

Principle 6: *Unless there is a change in atmosphere, what thaws in the sun will freeze again in the shade.*

To understand the damaging effects that curse-full families inflict upon children, we must pick up where the last lesson left off. We saw that, at times, parents try to fill their own empty neediness by drawing upon the good performance of their child. Little babies don't know they are loved and accepted; they have to learn that. They don't know they have worth; they have to experience that. They are not capable; they need a safe place in which to practice living. And they don't know that they are not alone. Without your presence, they feel alone. They are needy. These needy little people are also vulnerable. They can become victims to the hostile forces around them. They can be controlled. So, these little ones must enter a process in which they develop a strong sense of who they are. They need to grow deep in strength, wisdom, and a sense of fullness so they are no longer so vulnerable. But curse-full families don't care about wisdom, fullness, and identity. They care about external performance. Health is seen in behavioral terms. Whether or not God loves you is dependent on how well you obey on any given day. In controlling, shaming families, love and acceptance come as a reward for jumping through certain behavioral hoops. People are validated for their right doing, not simply for being. Children grow up needy and empty. To earn personal approval, which they never really receive, they learn to perform well. Good behavior is whatever the people with power in the family decide is positive. Hence, adults may believe that their children are spiritually mature, when in fact they may be people pleasers. Jeff VanVonderen speaks on drug and alcohol abuse. One statement that always triggers controversy: **"Just because you have somehow gotten your child to stop using chemicals, and instead they are now playing football or are in band, does not necessarily mean you have a healthy child."**

VULNERABLE PEOPLE GET SQUEEZED BY LIFE

I'd like to do an experiment. We'll start with a person who is healthy-looking on the outside but empty and vulnerable on the inside. Let's see what happens when we strip them of their full-looking exterior and put them in different environments. Let's call this guy David. The first environment in which we'll place David will be with a negative peer group. Arrows coming from the outside represent the negative peer pressure placed upon David to act in a way that is acceptable to the group (e.g., use drugs, sleep around, vandalize, shoplift, cheat in school, and lie to his parents). Along with each expected performance comes the offer (verbal or nonverbal) of acceptance: "If you do it our way, we'll accept you." And, there is the promise of importance: "This will really make you a man/woman." A chance to belong: "You are really out of it. Come join our group. You don't have to be alone." If David believes that doing these negative things-thereby earning the approval of the crowd-will make him OK, he may decide to do the negative behaviors. The empty neediness has not really been taken care of. David has just been squeezed to look like the environment around him.

CONTROL BY A CURSE-FULL FAMILY CHANGES NOTHING

David is a young man who is empty on the inside and empty on the outside. This child drives his parents, grandparents, pastors, and teachers nuts. The more behavior-oriented they are, the crazier he makes them. David's lack of positive behaviors and abundance of negative behaviors is bad public relations for those who equate behavior with health. "What would people think?" "Where did we go wrong?" "It's not our fault-it's those friends he's been seeing!" "How can he do this to us?" "What can we do?" At this point, the curse-full family may do what it does best- that is, they may try to control David's behavior by exerting pressure of their own. 1. Skip one more homework assignment and you're off the football team. 2. One more incident and you're off to Christian school. 3. Keep doing that you're done!

CHRISTIAN "BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION" NEVER WORKS

So many people view the church or Christian family as simply an environment whose purpose is to exert positive peer pressure. This is simply behavior modification in a religious context. David joins the church youth group, still looking for love and acceptance. The arrows coming toward David from the outside now represent peer pressure placed upon him to act in a positive way. "Don't listen to the world's music, listen to our music." "Don't read their books, read ours." "Don't talk like they talk, talk like we do." "Don't dress like they do, dress like us." "Don't go where they go, go with us." Once again, if he fulfills the performance expectations, there is the promise of love. Actually, if David keeps following the wrong crowd, he may get into enough trouble and experience enough pain for him to decide to quit behaving negatively. Or maybe one day, he will notice that he still doesn't feel loved, accepted, or capable. He is just as alone as he was before he followed the crowd: an empty, vulnerable person.

If David believes that doing these new positive behaviors has the power to meet his needs inside, he will go along with the new regimen. Nothing is really different about David, though. He has simply decided to please a different crowd. Once again, he has been squeezed from the outside, and so he looks on the outside like the environment around him. David has chosen to act in a positive manner. He is full on the outside but still empty on the inside. And while positive behaviors are defined as full by the positive crowd, emptiness is still empty in any crowd. Sure, David pleases the socks off his parents, grandparents, teachers, and pastor. The more performance-oriented they are, the more pleased. His positive performance earns their approval-though they would be shocked to think of it in that way. In effect, David is left in control of everyone's happiness and peace again.

WHERE IS GOD?

Ironically, the Christian family is operating under the performance curse. Sure, they'll give God credit for it. "Praise the Lord!" they say. "What a fine work the Lord is doing in David's life." But does David's change really have anything to do with the inner transforming work of the Holy Spirit? Or has David simply been squeezed into a prettier-looking version of emptiness? If David keeps acting this way, and if he is continually affirmed for his positive exterior, then the qualities that constitute inside fullness might be neglected. He could one day come to the end of his self-effort resources and have nothing on the inside on which to draw. Or, worse yet, he might never come to the end of his resources, in which case inside questions of the heart and how it is separated unto God might never be addressed.

A FINAL QUESTION TO ASK ABOUT CURSED RELATIONSHIPS

What are the results of our experiment? On the one hand, David used to look like this: He was empty on the outside because of behavior choices; he was empty and tired on the inside because nobody on the outside can meet inside needs. He was "bad publicity" for his family and church and easy to spot as an unhealthy person. On the other hand, David now looks like this: He is full on the outside because of his behavior choices. But he is empty and tired on the inside because no amount of positive behavior on the outside can meet his inside needs. He's "good publicity" for his church family and hard to spot as an unhealthy person.

There's just one question: Which version of David is healthier?

Always Remember: People are unhealthy when their outside fails to match their inside. Grace frees people to let their outside behavior match their inner hearts. Only God can change a person from the inside/out, and in relationships the three keys are faith, hope, and love, but the greatest is love.

VanVonderen, Jeff. Families Where Grace Is in Place (p. 77). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.