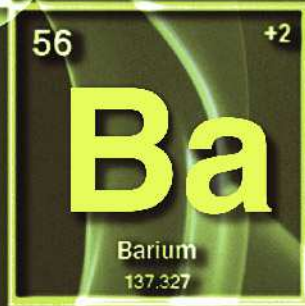


by Monte Wolverton



Two ranch-style, sixties-era homes sit side by side in a tidy suburban neighborhood.

Residents of the respective homes talk across the low picket fence that divides their front yards. They differ in age by about 30 years. Emma is a successful realtor in her early 60s, divorced decades ago. Gil, 30-ish, is married with one toddler, and is an up-and-coming manager for a business software company. They are comparing notes on a challenge they share: family

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members run amok.

"I raised her with high Christian values—I steered her clear of the trouble most teens get into," says Emma, about her 26-year old daughter Lisa. "She was such a good girl in high school—active in our church youth group—went to community college, got a nice job as a dental tech. Everything

seemed so safe. Then all of a sudden she moves in with some awful friends and now its like she's a whole different person—partying till three in the morning—piercings, tats, the whole thing. It's like the wild teenage life she never had. And I'm not too happy about the kind of men she keeps company with."

"It's strange, but I feel the same way about my dad," says Gil, referring to his 72-year-old father, Morgan. "He was tough on us growing up—we couldn't get anything past him. But

right after mom died he fell into a deep depression. Then, just as we thought he was ready to move on with life, he just...changed. First he bought that crazy Mustang convertible,

"...she's a whole different person—partying till three in the morning—piercings, tats, the whole thing... I'm not too happy about the kind of men she keeps company with."

and now he's running around with the kind of women that make me concerned. He goes to parties all the time and I think he's blowing through his retirement money like there's no tomorrow. I really don't know what to do."

"I don't either," says Emma. "This isn't how I raised Lisa."

"And this certainly isn't what my dad taught me," adds Gil.

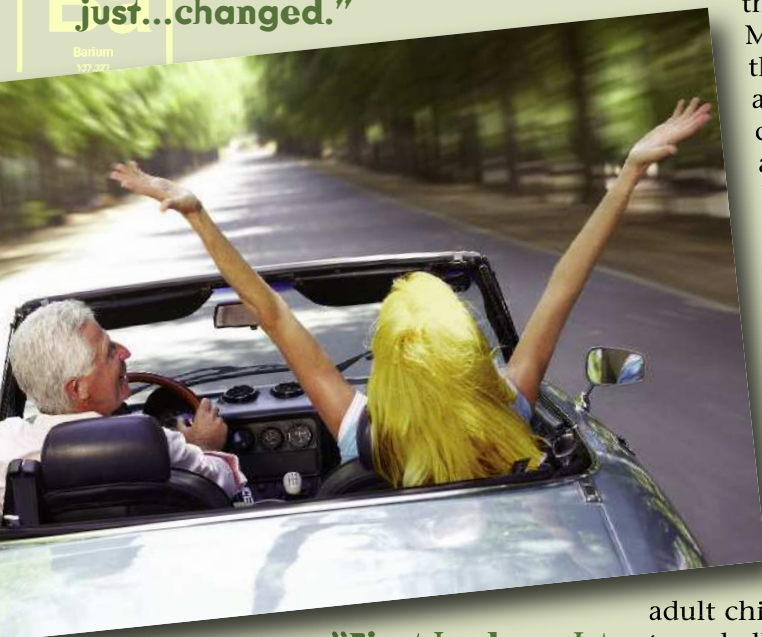
A rumble of dual glasspack mufflers grows in the distance. Gil recognizes it as his dad's tricked-out Mustang GT CS Drop Top. Emma's and Gil's heads rotate toward the sound. Around the corner comes the Mustang with grinning, silver-haired Morgan at the wheel. Beside him, with her arm around him, and sporting an

equally broad grin, sits, of all people, Lisa!

"I Didn't Think They Would Turn Out Like That!"

If your experience is like that of my wife and me, you spent a couple of decades doing what

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parents are supposed to do for their children: feeding them, providing for them, protecting them, teaching them, educating them. You tried to pass on values, ethics and morals. Then suddenly your kids were adults. They left home and assumed responsibility for themselves.

Your work was done (or so you thought).

Inversely, you may have experienced your parents doing the same thing for you (to a greater or lesser extent). Then perhaps you left home, thinking of your parents as rock-solid anchor points for your life.

If that's the way it worked out for you, consider yourself blessed. But this is not exactly the way many parents of grown children would describe the process. More typically they would tell a tale of disappointing and blindsiding turns of events, accompanied by debilitating anxieties and huge financial bailout(s). They would bemoan how their

adult children have tossed all their values and common sense aside. Ironically, many adult children of aging parents would tell a similar story, complaining that their parents have abandoned everything they taught their kids and have become

impossible to deal with. Suddenly, they are *behaving badly*.

Just What Do You Mean... "Badly"?

We all have somewhat differing definitions of "badly." So the first question we need to ask is

...you spent a couple of decades doing what parents are supposed to do for their children: feeding them, providing for them, protecting them, teaching them... Your work was done (or so you thought).

what is "bad" behavior? Consider this rough classification of bad behaviors, from the least to the greatest:

- Actions that are not your style, that you may find **inappropriate**, that may involve some risk or may seem a little unwise.
- Actions that are moderately unwise or risky, or that are questionable legally or possibly **inappropriate by Christian standards**.
- Actions that are highly unwise, risky, clearly **illegal, dangerous and immoral**—or that threaten the safety of the individual or others.

Okay—we may have to admit that much of what we think is "bad" falls into the first category. In our introductory story, is 72-year-old Morgan within his rights to invest in a Mustang? Certainly. Is it a wise investment? It may or may not be, depending on Morgan's financial resources and risk tolerance, but that's his decision.

More to the point, can Lisa and Morgan choose to have a relationship? Yes they can. Should they consider their age difference, as well as their motives? Probably. Can they decide to have a relationship anyway? Yes. Have they asked their families' opinions? Have they prayed about it? Have they seen a counselor? And what, exactly, is the *nature* of the relationship? *And are these details any of our business?*

I'd rather not bring this up, but...It could just be that we are being judgmental. Really? Sure. Why not? Christians are notoriously judgmental. Jesus knows that.

This all can be subjective. If you're an older single man, Morgan's behavior might sound pretty darn reasonable, yet it might sound outrageous if you're the son or daughter of an active senior like Morgan—or if you're the concerned parent of a young single woman like Lisa. So, “badly” can be a matter of opinion and perspective. Maybe it would be better, in some cases, to say that our adult kids or parents are behaving “non-preferentially.”

Here Comes the Judge

I'd rather not bring this up, but in the interest of being thorough, I have to. It could just be that we are being *judgmental*. Really? Sure. Why not? Christians are notoriously judgmental. Jesus knows that. It's the reason he gave us the lesson of the Mote and the Beam in Matthew 7:1-5, and a similar discourse in Luke 6:37-42.

Jesus also knows that the strongest driving force behind judgmentalism is religious legalism, although we may paint it with virtuous-sounding words like “Christian Values” or “Christian Morality.” We need to consider the likelihood of our own judgmentalism before we go any further, because, according to Jesus, we won't be able to see clearly to help our loved ones—even if they really need it.

Judgmentalism can thrive in families, where nearly any action on the part of a given family member automatically convenes a “jury” of other family members. This is understandable, because the actions in question may disrupt family dynamics—or

may impact the family financially. Yet few of the family jury's decisions are welcomed by the “defendant,” and most are ignored.

Beyond that, “concerned” friends and perhaps church members are quick to swoop in with their opinions and solutions. If we are genuine friends, and if we are fellow Christians, this is a good time to be quiet and offer support rather than opinion.

If we have considered our own judgmentalism, then we can safely proceed. We still have two more categories of behavior to examine.

Let's consider category 2. **Inappropriate by Christian standards?** Surely this must be bad. But what if our standards are derived from a misapplication of Scripture? For example, what if your 30-year-old son has tossed aside the family tradition of strict church attendance every week—or what if he is enjoying a beer now and again with his friends—is he really violating biblical Christian standards, or just human religious traditions?

In this category we might also include parents or adult children who, through poor decisions, place themselves in harm's way or allow themselves to be taken advantage of or victimized.

When it's time for mom to move from the home she has lived in for 30 years to a retirement or nursing facility, we might encounter protests, end-runs to other family members, and refusals to budge, perhaps on issues of needed medical procedures and health care. Is this really “bad”

behavior or is it just a difficult and frustrating life transition, and a matter of our own sympathy and communication skills?

Finally, there's the third category—**illegal, dangerous and immoral**. Here we can say with confidence that the behavior in question is bad.

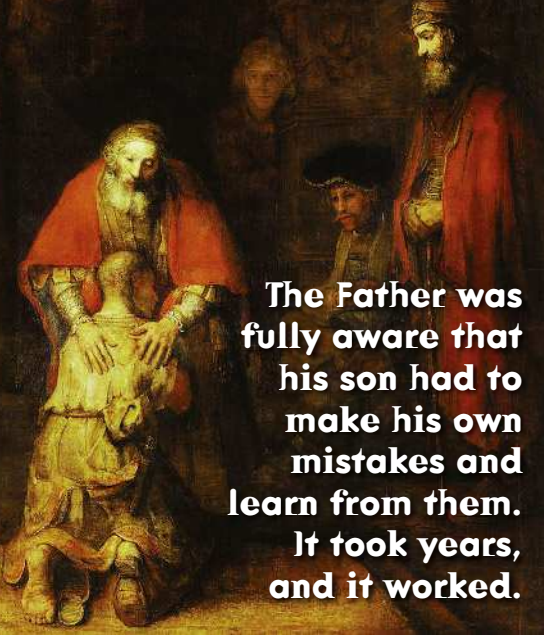
How could this happen? How can a person who has been benign, cooperative and law abiding through one stage of life suddenly become a different person? One reason may be that those who have been protected from misbehavior in restrictive religious upbringings sometimes feel compelled to let loose when life circumstances offer them new freedom. Finally, they can sew the wild oats they were never allowed to in the past. Protected from the ups and downs of the real world, they were not able to make mistakes and learn from the consequences, leaving them open to all kinds of trouble later in life.

Child psychiatrist and author Rudolf Dreikurs summed it up: “Children never learn to think for themselves if we do it all for them and hand it down ready-made.”

Even for older adults, a life of restrictive routine and religious regimentation can produce a similar phenomenon. Retirement, the death of a spouse or other abrupt life changes can mean a new dimension of freedom. To them, it may feel like a welcome rebirth, but to a concerned adult child, it may seem like total anarchy.

What Can We Do?

What *should* you do? While there are myriad bad choices (and then we would find



The Father was fully aware that his son had to make his own mistakes and learn from them. It took years, and it worked.

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt, circa 1668

our adult kids and our parents don't ultimately answer to us—they answer to a Higher Source, who is working with them (or will work with them) in spite of how it may look to us. We need to pick our battles carefully. The Apostle Paul encourages us, "Brothers and sisters, what if someone is caught in a sin? Then you who live by the Spirit should correct that person. Do it in a gentle way. But be careful. You could be tempted too" (Galatians 6:1).

ourselves behaving badly), our wise choices boil down to three:

1. Do nothing. This might be the hardest choice, because chances are we will do *something*, even when we should have done nothing. If an adult loved one is simply stepping outside the box of our definition of propriety, it's probably better for us to resist the urge to intervene—even if a behavior seems unwise. Premature intervention and unsolicited advice have ways of backfiring and hardening our loved ones against any advice whatsoever. Often the most effective thing we can do is pray—asking God to do what we cannot do—and asking him to help us know when and if we need to act.

2. Offer advice. Is the situation more dire? We can diplomatically offer an opinion, advice or admonition. A few well-chosen words can make a huge difference. In more extreme cases an intervention, including other family members, may be in order. But be prepared for nothing to change immediately. Remember that

3. Get professional help. If a loved one is breaking the law, or presenting a clear and present danger to themselves or others, the situation is probably out of your control. Are there medical or psychological issues that should be investigated? We may need to talk to a medical doctor, professional counselor or social worker who will point us in the right direction. Are there legal issues? We don't want to make the mistake of thinking it's "cheaper" to handle it on our own. We may need to consult with an attorney, or talk with the police. Our loved one may not take this well, to say the least—but we are taking steps to provide them with the help they need.

At Your Wit's End?

All through this, your only viable option may be prayer—effectively turning the matter over to God. This can feel less than satisfactory, because *God has a habit of not moving as rapidly as we would like.* His solutions can take decades. And in any case, our main job is

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simply to be there with love and support when our loved one's chickens come home to roost (or when their wild oats sprout and wither).

Consider the Parable of the Prodigal Son (or with a little rearrangement, it could be a parable of a prodigal parent). In Luke 15:11-32, the Father didn't run frantically after the son when he left home with his inheritance. The Father didn't sermonize, threaten, cajole, angrily fulminate or terrify his son with hell-fire-and-brimstone rhetoric. He merely let him go.

The Father was fully aware that his son had to make his own mistakes and learn from them. It took years, and it worked. At the end of the learning process, the Father received his son back—no judgment and I-told-you-sos. The son didn't even have the best reason for returning, yet the Father welcomed him home without reservation.

After all, this long-term process is the teaching method God uses with most people in the world. While there is often much pain involved because of our own intractability, it's the method that teaches most effectively.

Whether we find ourselves in the role of a Morgan, a Lisa, a Gil, an Emma, another family member or a concerned friend, if we can trust God to do what only he can, we can also trust that his ultimate outcome will be the best possible. □

Award-winning author, syndicated editorial cartoonist and Associate Editor of Plain Truth and Christianity Without the Religion magazines, Monte Wolverton lives with his wife Kaye in Washington State, near enough to their kids and grandkids.