

QUESTION: What does Proverbs 20:11 mean when it says, “Even a child is known by his deeds, whether his work is pure and right”?

ANSWER: The writer of Proverbs is teaching us an important truth about human character—it’s not something that remains hidden with age. Our actions reveal who we truly are, even at an early age. As Proverbs 20:11 (ESV) says: “Even a child makes himself known by his acts, by whether his conduct is pure and upright.”

This verse highlights that a person’s character, whether good or bad, becomes evident early in life. From the very beginning, a child’s behavior reveals aspects of their inner nature. While children may not have fully matured in understanding or reasoning, the inclinations of their hearts are already evident through their actions. A child who shows kindness, honesty, or love for learning is already displaying qualities that can be cultivated. Conversely, a child who lies, is selfish, or displays signs of aggression reveals a deeper condition of the heart that requires attention.

In this light, the verse teaches parents and guardians to observe and guide children in the right direction early on. Proverbs 22:6

(ESV) reinforces this idea: “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” Proper guidance and training in the early years set the foundation for lifelong habits and values.

The verse also suggests that parents should not assume that negative behaviors will automatically disappear with age. For instance, if a child engages in dishonesty or selfishness, don’t simply dismiss it as “childish” behavior. Instead, correct these behaviors early, as they may become deeply ingrained over time. Proverbs 29:15 (ESV) states: “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.” It is a parental responsibility to guide the child in wisdom and righteousness, shaping them into godly individuals.

Theological Reflection:

Theologically, this passage reflects the biblical understanding of human nature. From a young age, we are born with a sinful nature, as stated in Psalm 51:5 (ESV): “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” The heart of man, from childhood, is naturally inclined to sin (Jeremiah 17:9). However, the grace of God works in the lives of believers to

transform this nature. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, and as a result of spiritual training, children can grow to reflect God's righteousness in their lives.

This is why the training of children is not just about correcting bad behaviors, but also about imparting a knowledge of God's truth. As Ephesians 6:4 (ESV) instructs: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Children must be taught the ways of the Lord so that they grow in wisdom and understanding. This involves not just correcting their wrong behaviors but also fostering a love for God's Word and His ways.

In the same way that a child's actions reflect their heart, the actions of Christians reflect their spiritual state. After salvation, the fruits of the Spirit begin to manifest in the believer's life, even if they are spiritually immature. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV), Paul declares: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." The moment someone comes to Christ, their spiritual gifts begin to emerge. This is confirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:7 (ESV): "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." These gifts and callings are not waiting to be fully

matured; they begin to work as soon as the believer is saved.

The Role of Parents in Spiritual Development:

The responsibility of parents goes beyond simply providing for their child's physical needs; they are also called to nurture the spiritual growth of their children. Deuteronomy 6:6-7 (ESV) emphasizes this: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." Parents must consistently model a Christ-centered life, teaching their children the Scriptures, and guiding them in the ways of the Lord.

Just as a child's physical behavior can be molded, so can their spiritual life. The habits and patterns they form early on—whether in prayer, Bible reading, or worship—will shape their spiritual walk as they grow. Proverbs 4:23 (ESV) states: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." This underscores the importance of guarding the heart from a young age and instilling godly values that will remain throughout life.

Spiritual Gifts and Maturity:

Even in the spiritual realm, children or new believers show signs of their gifts early on. 1 Timothy 4:12 (ESV) encourages young believers: “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” God has given each believer spiritual gifts that are evident as soon as they come to faith. These gifts, such as evangelism, teaching, prophecy, and worship, begin to emerge in their lives, sometimes in ways that may be surprising.

For example, a new believer with the gift of evangelism might feel an intense desire to share the gospel, even though they are new in their faith. Likewise, a new believer with the gift of prophecy might experience visions or dreams from God, as described in Joel 2:28 (ESV): “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.”

As these spiritual gifts emerge, it is important to encourage and guide new believers in their use, just as we would guide children in their growth. These gifts are not a result of maturity alone but

of God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion:

When a child or a new believer comes to faith, their gifts and tendencies become evident. It is the responsibility of parents, mentors, and the church to nurture and guide them toward spiritual maturity. Proverbs 20:11 teaches us that early behaviors—whether good or bad—are a reflection of a deeper reality within. Just as parents correct and encourage good behavior in children, so too should believers cultivate the spiritual gifts and fruit of the Spirit in their own lives.

May the Lord bless you and guide you in nurturing the gifts He has placed in you and your children.

Understanding Proverbs 20:11 – Even a Child is Known by His Deeds

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