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## Understanding Attachment: A Fundamental Parenting Principle



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## Preface: Basic Truths about God and Man

Scripture teaches that God is both holy (*1 Peter 1:16*) and merciful (*Psalm 116:5*). Scripture also teaches that man is both sinful and loved by God (*Romans 5:8*). While these are very basic truths about God and man, they can seem paradoxical. In our finiteness, we can have difficulty accepting the coexistence of God's graciousness and His holiness. We want to acknowledge that this paper will focus heavily on God's mercy and love for us; however, this is in no way meant to diminish God's holiness. As you read of God's love for you and those God puts into your life, may it lead you to worshipping God who is both holy and merciful.

## God as the Model Parent

In the Bible, God often uses the relationship between parents and children as an example of His relationship with us, His people.

*Psalms 103:13, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him."*

*Isaiah 49:15, "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee."*

*Proverbs 3:12, "For whom the Lord loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth."*

Throughout each child's life, it is important for his parents to connect with him by teaching truth and affirming the child's experiences that are in line with truth, just as God does for us (*Deuteronomy 6:5-7*). Parents are to help their children develop an accurate view of who God is and how He interacts with His people. How does God react to our hurts and joys? What does God tell us about whom we are and who He is? Think about how profoundly an individual's answers to these questions affect his life. "Can I trust God?" "Could God really love me?" What do the answers to those questions mean to us as parents of children, young or old?

## God is the Creator of Attachment

Within the human makeup, God has created a desire for healthy connection with others (*Gen. 2:18*). The Bible is a book about relationships; first and foremost God's relationship with His creation and secondarily our relationships with each other. Since relationships are such an important part of life, it is important to learn how to relate to others in healthy ways. Attachment is a term that can be used to help us understand relationships. Researcher John Bowlby developed an attachment theory that provides a framework for how attachment develops. His research showed that we develop an attachment style at a young age, which is largely affected by bonding experiences with our primary care-givers (most often our parents). Bonding experiences include things like receiving healthy physical touch, eye contact, affection and other activities where an emotional connection is made. Conversely, absent or disrupted attachment can have profound consequences in a developing child's life.

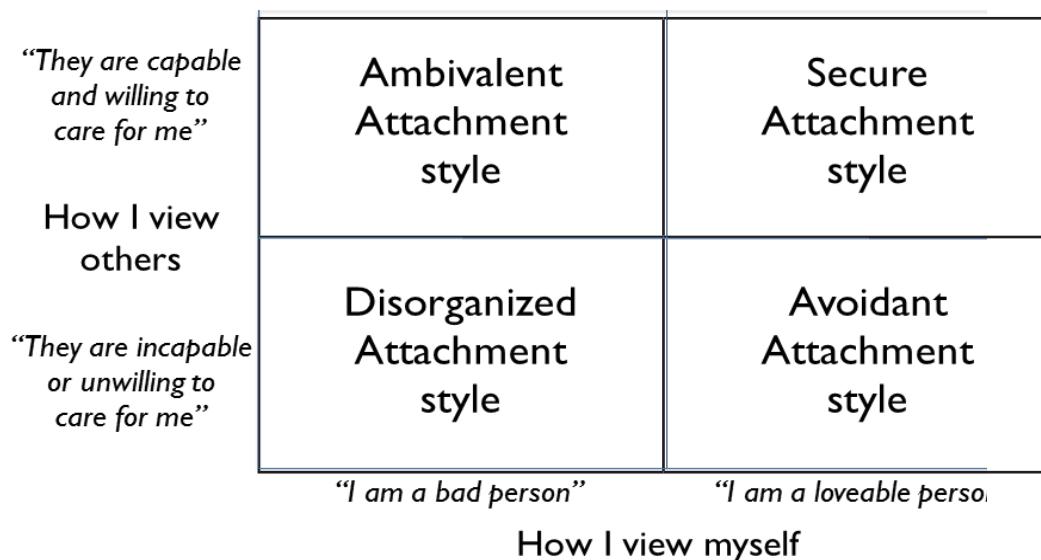
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## Attachment Styles

Attachment theories suggest that through bonding experiences children begin to develop beliefs about themselves and the world they live in. Bowlby referred to these core beliefs as the child's *internal working model*. These central beliefs that the child begins to develop relate to the following two questions:

1. Are others capable and trustworthy of taking care of my needs?
2. Am I worthy of others' care and attention?

Based on combinations of how people answer these two questions, four attachment styles have been identified by combining beliefs about oneself and others. Each style has beliefs about self and others that affect how relationships are approached and viewed.



## Descriptions of Four Attachment Styles

1. **Secure Attachment.** Individuals with a secure attachment style are able to view themselves as lovable and also view others as being capable and willing to care for them.
2. **Avoidant Attachment style.** Individuals with an avoidant attachment style are able to view themselves as being loveable; however, they view others as being unable to respond to their needs. This tends to lead these individuals to keeping distant from others and trusting one's own ability to care for his needs over others' ability to do so.

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3. **Ambivalent attachment style.** Individuals with an ambivalent attachment style view themselves as bad and unlovable; however, they view others as being capable and willing to care for them. This often leads to fears of being abandoned or rejected once those in their life get to know them and realize they are not worthy of love. This fear can distance them from others as they try to hide who they are. It can also lead them to become overbearing or suffocating as they interpret perceived distance in relationships as rejection or abandonment.
4. **Disorganized attachment style.** Individuals with a disorganized attachment style see themselves as being unlovable and others as being unable to respond to their needs. This leads them to be quite emotionally conflicted and troubled in relationships.

## Implications for Attachment Styles

Understanding our belief systems about ourselves and others can help us better understand and engage in healthy relationships. Although our life experiences influence and shape us, our beliefs about ourselves and others need to be grounded and rooted in Scripture. We need to avoid overvaluing or devaluing the importance of ourselves and others. This often means that we must work to relearn and reshape some of our beliefs. *Romans 12:3* encourages man, “*not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly [accurately], according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.*” Clearly we are not to elevate ourselves higher than we ought; likewise, we are not to diminish the gifts that God has given us. Having the proper perspective of others and ourselves is important when it comes to relationships.

Parents or those in the parental role have a unique opportunity to help children begin to develop scriptural beliefs about themselves and others through their interactions with them. By creating a healthy bond with our children, we will help them develop the skills needed to be able to relate to others in a scriptural manner for their entire lives. Lessons learned about relationships in infancy and childhood provide the foundation for future relationships. One example of this is “accurate empathy” which is taught in *Romans 12:15* where we are told to “*Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.*” Being able to connect with others and their emotional state is an important aspect of relationships. Parents have the opportunity to teach children when to weep and when to rejoice. Parents also have the opportunity to teach and model how to connect with others when they are expressing joy or sorrow. While upbringing and attachment style is not the only factor in a child’s future decisions and choices, it does have a profound effect.