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The Essence of Being Human

When I was 13 years old, the difference between a good and a bad person was as clear as black and white. In my mind it was a fact, like I'm sure it still is to many people today. I was highly influenced by my family and members of our church, so if they thought that you were a "bad" person, then I did too. I grew up with the belief that there were good people, like churchgoers and community volunteers. Then there were bad people, like drug addicts and criminals. One Sunday I went to church with my friend Lauren, and my perspective was questioned.

The heels of our patent black leather shoes were clunking through the white fluorescent lit hallway of our church whenever we came across Jake. Jake was a kid who all the parents considered "bad" and who all the kids knew not to touch with a ten foot pole. He had a reputation for smoking cigarettes, hanging out with the high school kids, and most recently, running away from home. He was a year younger than I was, and it had been a few months since I had seen him last. I noticed my heart beat begin to quicken as I saw him approaching. His red sweatshirt was weathered and stained, draped over a pair of dirt smeared jeans. His hair was long and tucked away under his hood. As he came closer, I found myself divided between ratting him out to his grandmother or sticking around for my own curiosity. The first feeling subsided when he timidly asked us if we wanted to talk.

Lauren and I sat humbly on the carpet as he told us about how his mom did drugs, and how he couldn't face the nightmare of staying at home. He struggled to make it to school whenever he could, but it was as if the nightmare continued. Kids made fun of him for wearing the same clothes everyday and teachers grew aggravated about incomplete homework assignments. At night, he would try to stay the night at a friend's house, but at times ended up sleeping in the park, or pulling all-nighters walking around town. How could he be expected to do homework when he didn't even know where he would be sleeping that night? Sitting there in my khaki skirt and pantyhose, the strong smell of popuri and the pastors message pouring through the speakers nearby, nothing felt the same. I suddenly felt full of guilt and compassion. "Please, don't tell my grandma," Jake pleaded, and I knew I wouldn't. I didn't judge him for running away, or hanging out with wrong people, or all the times he was obnoxious in youth activities. He was struggling and making some bad decisions, but I didn't think that he was a bad kid. All of the parents looked at him as disrespectful and a nuisance, and maybe he was, but he was only a kid, and everyone had been too quick to assume that he was just trying to be mischievous. They didn't take the time to find out why he was wearing a mask.

I began to question what made someone a bad person. The Bible says that all sins are equal and that by thinking about committing a sin, it's as if you already did it. If I thought of doing something that I knew was wrong, then wouldn't that make me just as "bad" as the person who acted on it? I knew that I had made mistakes throughout my life, but I didn't believe that I was a bad person. I started to wonder if we all do bad things, and think of doing bad things, then aren't we all equal? Maybe there are no bad people in the world, but just people. People who make mistakes. You can take someone like Jake and make your assumptions, but once you get to know them and understand who they are, your point of view about them could take an 180° turn.

I never saw Jake again, but he changed the way that I view people. Talking with him, sitting in the hallway of our church, was one of the first times that I realized how everyone on this planet is dealing with their own struggles. I don't believe that anyone is any better of a person than someone else, or that anyone is any worse of a person for the mistakes that they've made. Some people don't want to say that they're equal to someone who they think is a bad person. However, if we could take a look into some of their thoughts, I'm sure that there would be things that they would be ashamed of. Mistakes aren't something to judge people by. We all make them, and that's part of the essence of being human. It took a twelve year old to help me realize that it's easy to look at someone, or hear about something that they did, and immediately distinguish them as being a good or bad person, but what's harder is to look at them and realize that they're just a human being, and that we all make mistakes.