A PARENT'S GUIDE TO

Antiheroes

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Kicking Tail, Taking Names, and Blurring the Lines

Antiheroes—characters who refuse to be defined as the "good guys" or the "bad guys"—are rapidly growing in popularity, especially in teen culture. From Deadpool to Rick Grimes to Walter White, antiheroes live and thrive in the ambiguous gray, blurring the lines between right and wrong. Yet we connect with and relate to them on an instinctual level because they accurately reflect our flawed humanity. And as the next generations' role models, they're doing a lot more than entertaining us; they're also influencing how we think and perceive the world. So let's talk about how can we help our teens be wise and discerning when it comes to their heroes, super or not.

—— What is an antihero?

An antihero is a protagonist who lacks most of the positive traits associated with a stereotypical hero. They're known for their rejection of traditional hero archetypes and for living in a sort of moral "gray area." Antiheroes are imperfect, usually act out of self-interest, and have complicated histories and emotions.

—— Why are they featured in fiction?

Life isn't ideal, often leaving us in difficult circumstances where it seems that there's no straightforward, 100% right choice. For example, if a man's family is starving, should he steal a loaf of bread to feed them if that's his last chance to save them? It's a difficult moral quandary, and certainly a case can be made for either side. As Christians, we'd probably spend a good deal of time agonizing over which is the right thing to do, which option brings the most glory to God. But antiheroes just straight up steal the bread. And they don't just steal it; they make a show of it, criticizing everyone for not giving them the bread in the first place.

It can sometimes be refreshing for students to see heroes subvert unjust authority like that. Sometimes when tax dollars get wasted and we lose our jobs without good reason, or when we disagree with a new law that gets made, we wish there were some kind of hero to stand up to the injustice. But of course, vigilante justice is not even close to ideal. With no checks and balances, and one maverick guy doing things his way, evil and injustice are confronted by more evil and more injustice.

—— Who are some popular antiheroes?

Tony Soprano (1999–2007): The first in the wave of pop-culture antiheroes, Tony Soprano from the TV show *The Sopranos* is a crime boss for the most powerful criminal organization in New Jersey and is involved in a variety of less-than-legal (or moral) activities. But his strong sense of family and his occasional "heart of gold" moments allowed him to connect with audiences, paving the way for the next two decades of antiheroes to blossom.

Dexter Morgan (2006–2013): From the self-titled TV show *Dexter*, this forensic analyst is a sociopathic serial killer by night, motivated by an urge he calls his "dark passenger" originating in the witness of his mother's murder, but justifies himself by only killing murderers. The show follows his story of realization and subsequent exploration of how his killings have affected him, his family, and his friends.

Captain Jack Sparrow (2003–): The swashbuckling rogue pirate from *The Pirates of the Caribbean* films has gripped moviegoers for over a decade. His daring adventures, charming personality, and fierce (if inconsistent) loyalty contrast harshly with his narcissistic tendencies and "pirate ethics."

Tony Stark (2008–): The face of Marvel, Tony Stark has taken leading roles in the *Iron Man* and *Avengers* films. The snarky playboy doesn't become Iron Man because he thinks it's the right thing to do; he does it because it makes him popular and well liked. His self-obsession repeatedly bites him in the butt, but in the end of every story, he still comes out on top.

The Suicide Squad (2016): A crew of DC's villains is forced by a government agency to undertake suicide missions. The group, lead by the villain and sometimes antihero Deadshot, wrestles with their motivations for family, seeking redemption, and their history of crime.

Deadpool (2016–): The star of his own top-grossing blockbuster, Wade Wilson (aka Deadpool, the Mercenary with a Mouth) is the embodiment of the irreverent antihero. His sexual promiscuity, foul language, and extreme display of violence pushes the limits of what's even allowed to be shown in a theater. But his humor and generally approachable nature has made him one of the most popular comic-book characters (antihero or otherwise) of all time.

Other notable antiheroes: Tyler Durden from *Fight Club*, Batman from DC Comics, Don Draper from *Mad Men*, Walter White from *Breaking Bad*, Frodo from *The Lord of the Rings* (see below), Wolverine from the *X-Men* franchise, John Wick from the *John Wick* franchise, Rick Grimes from *The Walking Dead*, and the Punisher from the self-titled Netflix show.

How popular are they?

In a word: very. *Deadpool* made $783 million in box office, making it the highest-grossing rated-R film of all time. Although it contains nudity, sexual content, and grotesque violence, it was watched by both adults and teens alike.

Breaking Bad was universally acclaimed by critics, receiving the highest consistent rating of all time by several reviews. The final episode received an incredible 10.3 million views. It's interesting to note that the only shows that have higher ratings for the series finale also feature antiheroes (*The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City*).

Filmmakers see this trend and are looking to meet the demand by providing the world with more and more antiheroes. The popularity is still in the upward trend, and no one knows how popular they could be five or ten years from now.

Why are they so popular?

Common superheroes portray an ideal that is simply not realistic. They're amazing…too amazing: We can't relate to them. Antiheroes allow a unique level of relatability not seen in other types of heroes. They are flawed, complex, strong, and have admirable intentions.

They are flawed. As sinful people who fall short of the glory of God, we can never be perfect, and we certainly aren't. Antiheroes are an acknowledgement of the fact that even when we try to do good, our sinful nature limits us.

They are complex. Life isn't simple. It's full of ups and downs and all kinds of circumstances. A single-emotion, smile-all-the-time person is nice as an acquaintance, but real friends share a depth and range of emotion.

They are strong, despite weakness. They have an impressive and admirable strength to them, yet they are also plagued by some kind of tragic flaw. We all have strengths and weaknesses. Superman easily flies around, has limitless strength, and always makes the right decision. Kryptonite is a contrived, artificial weakness that's outside of him. But *our* weaknesses are often internal, within our very person, and are things we fight against daily. And sometimes, we lose the fight. What's truly inspiring is when greatness comes out of that struggle.

Their intentions are admirable. We love the underdog. Antiheroes actually mean well, and we can see that. Unfortunately, as a result of circumstances, they have to go about achieving these good things in unconventional ways. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White is diagnosed with cancer, and because of the failures of the healthcare system, he can't afford to pay medical bills, leaving his family with massive debt when he dies. Since there is no conventional option for him, he decides to produce and sell methamphetamine during his last bit of remaining time to make enough money to support his family. Good intentions…bad execution. Often, we want to do good things, but government, school, church, etc. gets in the way. We can respect and relate to innovators who achieve good goals through unconventional (albeit wrong or illegal) means.

What kind of role model are they?

Antiheroes are quite different than the typical superheroes that were popular in previous generations. We parents would love to have our teens aspire to the noble ideals of a Superman or Spider-Man, but few of us would hope they act like Deadpool or a member of the Suicide Squad. They disrespect authority, play by their own rules, and do what they want when they want, so a teen behaving like these characters in class would find themselves in detention pretty quickly.

At the same time, it's important to distinguish between the [different kinds of antiheroes](#). A "classical antihero," like Frodo Baggins, still encourages readers and viewers to do the right thing and rely on their community despite his failures. However, a more "unscrupulous antihero" in the vein of Jack Sparrow leaves a large void in the realm of role models.

But there is also a great strength that comes from this individualistic mindset when in the proper context. What if an authority figure tells them to do something morally wrong? What if the rules have been set by bad people? What if they want to do good things, and do them no matter what anyone says? If they are like robots who do whatever people say, they may fall prey to bad things that come from their desire to conform and follow authority.

If your teen has a strong sense of right and wrong and has been raised with good values, chances are they will have the ability to discern between the good and bad qualities of antiheroes and know what they should aspire to. If a teen doesn't have a strong sense of right and wrong, the (at best) situational morality of the antihero might prove confusing, exciting, or enticing.

What messages are they sending to my kids?

Authenticity is a prominent theme in our culture. Antiheroes are far more authentic and genuine than their typical superhero counterparts. They are who they are, without shame. For better or worse, antiheroes will do whatever they deem fit based on their own internal

compasses. Jack Sparrow, for example, only follows an actual compass, a magical instrument that doesn't point north, but instead directs him to his heart's greatest desire.

Criticism of ideas and a refusal to blindly accept authority is a mainstay of any antihero-driven story. Antiheroes refuse to follow because they've been told to; their internal compasses must match the direction they're heading. V in *V for Vendetta* is the classic example of an antihero who will not submit to an authority he doesn't believe in. The anarchist uses his resources and passion to topple a corrupt government.

Antiheroes are generally **highly ingenious**. Because they only follow their hearts and throw off the constraints of authority, they must build (in many cases, literally) a way to make it in the world. Whether that's Tony Stark's Iron Man suits, Jack Sparrow's harebrained and drunken schemes that end up working, or Walt Whitman's drug empire, antiheroes are never conventional.

What positive behaviors/ideas do they normalize?

At the end of the day, antiheroes are just people. They're typically not anything particularly special, which is what's at the core of their appeal.

The more traditional antiheroes like Frodo show us that even though we're flawed, weak, and incapable, our community and outside influences (Samwise and Gandalf) can help us achieve our mission. An acknowledgement of our good-but-cursed nature and the potential we have in Christ to overcome it can be very encouraging to students wrapped up in their failures and faults.

Additionally, an antihero's refusal to compromise who they were made to be is laudable. In a culture of false authenticity and conformity, it's important that we encourage our teens to embrace their God-given passions and talents, while honestly acknowledging the failures in their broken nature.

What negative behaviors/ideas do they normalize?

Personal gain is the core motivation of antiheroes. They are self-focused at their core, often not really caring about anyone other than themselves and the people they love.

An antihero also defies authority and sometimes goes up against tremendous odds, but not always because of principles. His motives can be selfish, criminal, or rebellious. Many admire antiheroes because of their love of rebellion.

Antiheroes often have a moral code that changes depending on circumstances, mood, or personal experience. Antiheroes are the embodiment of a relativistic moral code, only doing what they feel is right with no objective standards.

What does God's Word say about antiheroes?

In some sense, the Bible only contains flawed heroes at best, tragic heroes at worst, and antiheroes by most definitions. No biblical character is perfect (save Jesus, of course) because

we do live in a cursed world. The distinctions between antiheroes and other kinds of heroes is very blurry in Scripture: These people have complicated motivations, deeply intrinsic flaws, and a history of struggling with doing the right thing for the right reason.

Who are some of the antiheroes in the Bible?

Samson: Judges 13-16—The entire book of Judges is full of antiheroes. From Barak to Gideon, antiheroes are the rule in this nearly lawless time of Israel, and Samson is no exception. God chooses to deliver Israel out of a 40-year bondage through Samson. He constantly fails his vows, shows his broken nature, and succumbs to temptation. However, in the end God still uses him to free Israel.

David—David is arguably the most complicated character in the Bible. Though described as "a man after [God's] heart," he's complicit in murder and commits adultery. His story is a twisted one, with tragic lows when he is betrayed by his own son and glorious highs when he retakes Jerusalem.

Jonah: The Book of Jonah—Though known almost exclusively for his experiences with large marine wildlife and a group of lazy pirates, Jonah has a very complicated set of motivations and desires. While called to be a prophet of God—and he does faithfully execute that calling in Israel—his self-interest and idea of a "better way" interferes when he receives a command to do something he really doesn't want to do. This inner struggle between calling and desires typifies the antihero's plight

Noah: Genesis 6:9–9:17—These last two have a good deal of media coverage, due to their fairly recent movies. Famous for his massive ark and floating menagerie, it's clear even from his brief mentions in Scripture that Noah is a conflicted character. While shown to be the only good man left on earth, he ends up drunk and exposed after the flood. His controversial portrayal in the film expounds on that theme. He might be the most moral man on the planet, but his struggle with leaving millions upon millions of people to die takes its toll.

Moses—Throughout the Pentateuch, Moses is shown to be the man for the job, i.e. the man to lead the people of Israel from slavery, through their wanderings, and into the Promised Land. However, his rash temper causes him trouble on multiple occasions, from the beginning of the story, when he kills an Egyptian for beating an enslaved Hebrew, to the end, when he isn't allowed to enter the Promised Land due to his anger and disobedience. The also-controversial film about him explores how this dichotomous character freed the Israelites. (Christian Bale's portrayal of Moses is a gritty one, one in which the Patriarch seems more comfortable with a spear in a chariot at war than with a staff in an audience chamber pleading for the Israelites.)

Ultimately, that's the point of these flawed heroes in the Bible. God's power is made perfect in our weakness. God uses flawed, broken human beings to bring glory to His name and elevate us to a place where we would otherwise be unable to go.

Will my teen(s) learn good values from them?

Well, that depends how you define "good." As Christians, we believe that goodness is defined by God's character and embodied when He came to earth and set the example for us in the person of Jesus Christ. So how do antiheroes match up to the values of Jesus?

Jesus loves antiheroes. That's not really groundbreaking news, since Jesus loves everyone. But it's important to remember that Jesus seeks restoration for everyone, no matter how bad

they are. More so, Jesus is not just interested in restoring personal brokenness, but systemic sin as well. Sin isn't just personal; it's also corporate. The systems, structures, and powers that be are bent toward evil. That's why He came: to restore not individuals and the entire created order back into right relationship with the Father. Jesus sees the brokenness in Walter White as he's selling meth, in Deadpool as he seeks affection from women, and in Scarface as he's facedown in cocaine. The ability to empathize with people's brokenness is a necessary precursor to bringing them the restoration provided through Jesus. Perhaps empathizing with the struggles of antiheroes can help us to better empathize with the struggles of people in our lives and ultimately lead them to the One who saves us from our struggles with sin.

Jesus did the right thing, every time. When Jesus was tempted by Satan, He never gave in. When Jesus was criticized and threatened by the Pharisees, He stuck to what He knew to be true. Some people might say that Jesus was an individualist because He seemed to do things the way He wanted, despite external social pressure. But Jesus was no individualist; He was submissive to the greatest external force of all: God. Antiheroes, on the other hand, are pure individualists. They submit to no one but themselves. Sometimes that's good, but sometimes it's bad. In order to be good all the time, we can't submit to ourselves, but rather to the One who embodies goodness.

Jesus wants us to forgive so that we may have peace with one another. But antiheroes are focused on revenge. They've been wronged in some way and seek to inflict harm on their enemies to bring about their version of justice. An antihero would never forgive an enemy, let alone love them or [do good to those who persecute them](#).

Antiheroes provide an example of the depravity and limits of human goodness. **We may relate to them, but we should never aspire to become them. Jesus, as the perfect example of goodness, is the goal to which we should all aspire.**

What do they teach about justice?

Antiheroes focus very heavily on the idea of justice, in one form or another. In the crime-ridden streets of Gotham or the post-apocalyptic world of The Walking Dead, antiheroes dole out their own brand of (frequently brutal) justice. What is justice? And, maybe more importantly, who is responsible for executing justice?

Justice is typically defined by law students and philosophers as something along the lines of [giving every man his due](#). But in reality justice has become synonymous with punishment. From that perspective, antiheroes are doling out their own form of justice. They're giving their enemies what they think they deserve: "[an eye for an eye](#)." And [on some level, that's empowering](#). Millennials and Gen Zers often feel like "the system" doesn't do them or their friends justice, so seeing a person taking things into their own hands gives them a bit of a vicarious rush.

But that's not the full story. God's ultimate justice is not centered on punishment, but redemption. In his essay "Jesus, the Jews, and the Politics of God's Justice," Dan Bell explains, "In contrast to wordly notions of justice that demand a strict rendering of what is due, the justice of God, that is, Jesus, requires the endurance of offense and the offer of forgiveness in the hope that the unjust has been made just by being gathered back into communion."

Jesus is therefore the very justice of God. Not as a victim of divine retribution, "but as the very embodiment of God's justice through his faithfulness and obedience in manifesting God's unrelenting desire for reconciliation." Contrary to the world's notions of justice, Christ-

centered justice includes acts of mercy and forgiveness to overcome sin. Think and talk about it with your teens: When was the last time an antihero forgave his enemies instead of seeking to destroy them? And what would it look like to fight evil and injustice in the real world without also becoming evil and unjust? Can you think of any examples of real people who confronted evil without becoming evil themselves?

Do the ends justify the means?

That's the core understanding of ethics for many an antihero: "It doesn't matter how I do something, as long as my intentions and end-game are pure." This perspective is known as consequentialism, usually manifesting in the form of utilitarianism. The core idea that the process doesn't matter is a fantastic place to start having conversations about why we believe things are right and wrong. Why do Christians believe in an absolute moral standard, where each action in and of itself is judged as moral or immoral? What does "the means are the ends" mean? Is that a more biblical perspective for Christians to have? Having these conversations will set your student up for success when their motives are questioned or they find themselves in a seemingly moral gray area.

But what about hope?

Many teens find that antiheroes give them hope for the cursed world we live in: Someone is actually doing something about this broken world. Until they find a way to have hope outside of the antihero, they'll continue looking for salvation in that character. Building a perspective of eternal hope, as well as pointing to real-life heroes who weren't perfect but were still able to make a difference, can give them the hope they need to put the philosophy of the antihero behind them.

Spiritually speaking, it's also important to remember "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

So how do I talk with my teen(s) about antiheroes?

Antiheroes are not inherently any more dangerous than any other character archetype. All media has a story and an agenda; antiheroes are no different. After watching *Breaking Bad*, it's highly unlikely that teens will start selling meth. But it's possible that they might develop an increasing distrust of authority figures, gain increased sympathy for criminals, or have a desire to be unconventional in their approach to solving problems. All of these things can be good as long as they're directed in a positive way.

Conversations are the foundation for addressing any passion, obsession, or love. Take your teen to see that movie with that antihero protagonist, then take them to coffee or ice cream afterward. Ask them questions about what draws them to the character. Help them explore the positive and negative messages the character is proclaiming. Above all, pursue a genuine relationship with him/her in which these conversations can thrive.

The key to these conversations is to acknowledge what makes the antiheroic character appealing to

teens. Do they love the depth of character of Batman? Are they intrigued by the motivations of Rick Grimes? Focus on the *why* of the appeal and explore the positives of the character. The issues of the character or story need to be addressed in the context of understanding. Beginning the conversation with all of the horrible things that the character does will not lead to a fruitful relationship. Rather, odds are that teens will simply shut down because something they love has been attacked.

Final thoughts

Antiheroes are interesting, often deep, and typically thought-provoking. They fill an interesting space in entertainment. The understanding that people are flawed and the subsequent desire to connect with flawed heroes—whether complex heroes, antiheroes, tragic heroes, or even villain protagonists—has driven an entire sub-genre of media. But flawed heroes and antiheroes are not a new thing. From the ancient dramas of the Greeks to the realistic characters of Scripture, antiheroes have always appealed to people. Just as heroes have the ability to make us strive to be much more than we are, antiheroes tell us that we aren't perfect and will make mistakes, and that's okay.

So if we can help our teens learn one thing from their favorite characters, it's this: **People aren't perfect, and that's okay. Why? Because we have a solution to our depravity: Christ Himself.** Though antiheroes will try anything and everything to fill the gap that is our brokenness, we need look no further. We can help our teens learn this crucial less by taking the time to understand the appeal and by having conversations about the context of and appropriate solutions for our very-good-but-cursed state of being.

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