

CHARACTER

Throughout my lifetime there has always been some startling news story regarding the moral fall of some well known person. The date changes but the story line is pretty much the same. I also have noticed that history recorded in the Bible tells of the same situation reoccurring time and time again, just like it has in the past fifty years. It seems that the human condition on planet earth hasn't changed all that much.

Eccl 1:9-10

9 That which has been is what will be,
That which is done is what will be done,
And there is nothing new under the sun.
10 Is there anything of which it may be said,
"See, this is new"?
It has already been in ancient times before us.
NKJV

We have all seen the ol' story of a person secretly behaving in some forbidden action being discovered, of another double life of sin that finally paid devastating wages. It seems that the media takes special delight in bringing such failures to the public attention when it involves a ministry or a church leader. But the church isn't the only hiding place for hypocrites.

When I was in prison myself, I would ask folks to join me in going to a church service and most would refuse my invitation, saying, "There are too many hypocrites there for me." When I would admit the hypocrites are there, and then point out that hypocrites also go to the chow hall and that they go to the chow hall themselves, I would get a blushed face and a smile, but still the refusal.

Every profession has its hypocrites; there are bankers who embezzle money, athletes who use illegal drugs, lawyers who fabricate evidence, politicians who take bribes, doctors who peddle narcotics, psychologists who manipulate their clients into sexual activity, teachers who falsify grades, parents who neglect and abuse children. The list is endless. Human nature, being what it is, guarantees that we will find masqueraders in courtrooms, clinics, university class rooms, federal offices, adult foster care facilities, and in our family homes that appear to be quite wholesome and happy.

The Christian faith is strongly associated with character. Therefore it is always a shock to hear of some Christian leader falling to lust or some other sinful activity. Warren Wiersbe wrote "character is the raw material of life, out of which we either by diligence construct a temple or by negligence create a trash heap." Abraham Lincoln said that character was like a tree and that reputation was like the shadow of the tree. "The shadow is what we think of it," said Lincoln. "The tree is the real thing." Reputation is what people think we are; character is what God and the Holy Angles know we are. Evangelist D. L. Moody once said that character was "what a man is in the dark"; financial wizard J. P. Morgan called character the best collateral a person could give.

Character is what Jesus described in the Beatitudes and demonstrated in His own life and ministry in the Gospels. Character is made up of those beautiful qualities that Paul called the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22-23 and qualifications for office in 1 Timothy and Titus 1. People with character have something called integrity; that is, what they say and do comes from a heart fully dedicated to God. Integrity means inner wholeness; we are not trying to fool other people (hypocrisy) or fool ourselves (duplicity).

Character is Joseph saying “no” to Potiphar’s wife and going to prison for being honest and chaste. It’s Moses giving up the privileges of an Egyptian prince for the turbulent life and problems of a Jewish prophet, and for forty years sacrificially serving a people who didn’t deserve his leadership. It’s Jeremiah devoting his lifetime to faithfully pleading with his people, and then seeing the nation die before his very eyes. It’s Paul saying, “Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day” (Acts 23:1 NKJV), and getting slapped in the face for saying it. It’s Jim Elliot writing in his journal, “He is no fool to give what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.”

Character is revealed in the hidden things of everyday life as well as the dramatic things of our everyday public life . . . things like telling the truth when a lie would help you escape some troubling situation; or taking the blame when somebody else deserves it. It shows when you decide not to cut corners on a job that you think no one will inspect, or making unnecessary sacrifices to help people who won’t appreciate what you do anyway. Character means living your life before God, fearing only Him and seeking to please Him alone, no matter how you feel or think, or what others may say or do.

Building character is a difficult process that involves all of life’s experiences. Emerson wrote, “The force of character is cumulative,” in his essay “Self-Reliance.” Our character defines us, it reveals who we are.

For the Christian, a wholesome character (one that is healthy, and Godly) is formed by making Holy Scripture an integral part of our inner being and obeying what it says. That was so difficult for me, the obeying part, but gradually I realized I was doing it more and more. That wholesome character is formed by faithfully spending time in worship, prayer, and concentrating upon the word of God. It’s making sacrifices and willingly serving others whenever the opportunity is presented. Character is strengthened when we suffer and depend on the grace of God to bring us through and glorify His name. It means joining Job as he says, “But He knows the way I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). Character comes from discipline and devotion, from courage and commitment, from all of the things Paul experienced and wrote about in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 . . .and chapter 11:23-12:10.

2 Cor 6:3-10

3 We try to live in such a way that no one will be hindered from finding the Lord by the way we act, and so no one can find fault with our ministry. 4 In everything we do we try to show that we are true ministers of God. We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. 5 We have been beaten, been put in jail, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food. 6 We have proved ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, our sincere love, and the power of the Holy Spirit. 7 We have faithfully preached the truth. God's power has been working in us. We have righteousness as our weapon, both to attack and to defend ourselves. 8 We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. 9 We are well known, but we are treated as unknown. We live close to death, but here we are, still alive. We have been beaten within an inch of our lives. 10 Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything. NLT

2 Cor 6:3-10

3 Don't put it off; don't frustrate God's work by showing up late, throwing a question mark over everything we're doing. 4 Our work as God's servants gets validated — or not — in the details. People are watching us as we stay at our post, alertly, unswervingly . . . in hard times, tough times, bad times; 5 when we're beaten up, jailed, and mobbed; working hard, working late, working without eating; 6 with pure heart, clear head, steady hand; in gentleness, holiness, and honest love; 7 when we're telling the truth, and when God's showing his power; when we're

doing our best setting things right; 8 when we're praised, and when we're blamed; slandered, and honored; true to our word, though distrusted; 9 ignored by the world, but recognized by God; terrifically alive, though rumored to be dead; beaten within an inch of our lives, but refusing to die; 10 immersed in tears, yet always filled with deep joy; living on handouts, yet enriching many; having nothing, having it all.

(from THE MESSAGE)

2 Cor 11:23-12:10

23 They say they serve Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in jail more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. 24 Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. 26 I have traveled many weary miles. I have faced danger from flooded rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be Christians but are not. 27 I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food. Often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.

28 Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of how the churches are getting along. 29 Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger?

30 If I must boast, I would rather boast about the things that show how weak I am. 31 God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows I tell the truth. 32 When I was in Damascus, the governor under King Arêtes kept guards at the city gates to catch me. 33 But I was lowered in a basket through a window in the city wall, and that's how I got away!

2 Corinthians 12

12:1 Paul's Vision and His Thorn in the Flesh

This boasting is all so foolish, but let me go on. Let me tell about the visions and revelations I received from the Lord. 2 I was caught up into the third heaven fourteen years ago. 3 Whether my body was there or just my spirit, I don't know; only God knows. 4 But I do know that I was caught up into paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be told. 5 That experience is something worth boasting about, but I am not going to do it. I am going to boast only about my weaknesses. 6 I have plenty to boast about and would be no fool in doing it, because I would be telling the truth. But I won't do it. I don't want anyone to think more highly of me than what they can actually see in my life and my message, 7 even though I have received wonderful revelations from God. But to keep me from getting puffed up, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from getting proud.

8 Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. 9 Each time he said, "My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me. 10 Since I know it is all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. NLT

Character is rarely built in solitude; we need the responsibility and accountability that other Christians bring to our lives if our lives are to be lived with wholesome character. We may not enjoy all the experiences we go through, we need failures and disappointments, hurts that come from loved ones letting us down and serving people in general. The church pastoral staff may let us down, the elder's board may ignore us, the family and loved ones may not recognize all that we do for them, but the relationship of commitment and accountability helps us follow God's blueprint and build the wholesome character that pleases Him.

Nehemiah encouraged his people to rebuild the walls of the city one stone at a time; likewise, character is built a day at a time, a "stone" at a time, with patience and deliberation, all the

while seeking to follow God's step-by-step plan. Leaving the way of our lord, ignoring the warnings of His word, character, like the walls of Jerusalem can crumble. Character can be destroyed, little by little, in many hidden places deterioration can begin, unseen even by those who know us best, undetected perhaps even by ourselves, but never unnoticed by God. One day the storm comes, the enemy advances, and the structure collapses, and great is the destruction. Then folks ask, "Why," or "What happened."

Historians have often advised us that the great nations have all fell because of corruption from within. Likewise the deterioration of personal character is an "inside job." Ever so slowly, we drift from God and His way, falling into the snare of sin, and then usually we try to avoid responsibility by blaming others or pleading extenuating circumstances; but the excuses won't hold up in God's court. The simple fact is that character erodes because people fail to listen to Proverbs 4:23 . . .

Prov 4:23

23 Keep and guard your heart with all vigilance and above all that you guard, for out of it flow the springs of life. AMP

Prov 4:23

23 Above all else, guard your heart, for it affects everything you do. NLT

Our lives are built upon character , and character is built on the decisions we make day by day. The Franklin Reality Model demonstrates our actions are preceded by thinking. In their language, "thinking drives behavior." The daily decisions of life, small and great, cement each stone into the "wall of character." Sampson defied his parents and God's law, marrying a Philistine woman, not for a moment recognizing this would lead him into a Philistine dungeon. David decided to leave the battlefield and rest at home only to discover that he could not resist the wiles of the devil or his own lust. On the other hand, folks like Joseph, Joshua, Ruth, Ester, Peter and John decided to focus upon God and trust in Him: They were used mightily by God to accomplish exploits they hadn't even thought of. Like Gideon, we too, can be used when we have built our character on the word of God.

Character can erode, and our values can corrode. The erosion and corrosion is a process that usually begins with neglect: we stop reading God's word, we begin straying away from our Christian brothers and sisters, we do not meet with our accountability partners, and there is no time set apart to pray or meditate upon God's instruction for us. We stop hungering for holiness and focus upon our fleshly desires. First the drifting, then the secret sinning; we stop exercising spiritual discipline, and discernment. We find ourselves making secret arrangements to sin, telling ourselves that what nobody knows we can get away with. All the time erosion of character is taking place, values are being corroded that ultimately leads to the embarrassing public fall.

The process is deadly. As time goes on we find it easier and more convenient to sin (we don't have to be tempted anymore; we tempt ourselves) and find it easier to redefine the circumstances and justify our sinful behavior. We even get to speaking of different things which indicates where our minds are, and that reminds me of how important the things we say are to Jesus. He said. . .

Matt 12:33-37

34 Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth

good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things. 36 But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the Day of Judgment. 37 For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." NKJV

The unprotected, un-nurtured heart, gives way to a defiled conscience which contributes further to the decay of character. Circumstances are less than pleasurable, maybe boring, and quite possibly even painful, so we stop enjoying the wholesome business of Christian fellowship, Bible study, prayer and eventually even church attendance. To escape the reality of our situation we call on our imaginations to create a substitute fantasy world of our design. In our imagination, where nobody can see it, we build our own secret world where we have the power and we enjoy success. In this alternate world of self-deification, we satisfy unholy appetites that family and friends would be shocked to discover. We tell ourselves that we can enjoy these sins safely because all this corruption is safely hidden in our private video vault. We fail to remember that every evil thought and imagination works to tear down character and eventually comes out in the open some day.

Sadly, common everyday kind of folks, truly believe they can enjoy a double life and safely get away with it, that the truth will not find them out, that they will not reap a harvest of what they have sown. In their hypocrisy, they fool others; in their duplicity they fool themselves; but the truth is clear, there is no way to fool God and change His honorable laws. "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Gal 6:7 NKJV).

The truth eventually comes out, the facts are made known. "Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death" (James 1:15 NKJV). The womb of the imagination gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is all grown up, begins to kill. Character dies, devotion dies, values die, a wholesome home dies, reputation dies, service to others dies, and sometimes the perpetrator of these sins die as well. What God created with a glorious purpose in mind fails to produce His desired fruit and becomes a messy trash heap and then a graveyard. It is very predictable, and very sad.

The question of the ages has been, "Can damaged character be salvaged or restored?"

Of course it can . . . nothing is impossible for God! Jesus said:
"Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. 21 However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting." (Matt 17:20-21 NKJV)

Mark 10:27

27 But Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible." NKJV

Luke 18:27

27 But He said, "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God."
NKJV

The restoration of Character requires transformation that only God can provide. It will not happen if the offender offers excuses instead of the confession of truth, shows regret instead of repentance, resists authority and runs around looking for second and third opinions. Restoration of character will not occur if the offender rushes into the arms of the nearest false prophet who says "Peace, peace" where there is no peace. Restoration of character will not come to be when the offender depends upon secular treatment programs or rehabilitation programs that elevate man's knowledge above almighty God. God is sovereign and supreme. He created man and only He can restore and rehabilitate the mind of man.

Can we trust one who claims to have been restored by God?

Absolutely, if the offender is willing to confess sin humbly, judge it severely, turn from it completely, submit obediently, and cooperate with the "Potter" and His workers as they seek to make the broken vessel whole again. It will take time, restoration is a process governed by God and He is not bound by time. When restoration has been biblical and thorough and when the offender gives evidence of sincerity and humility, he/she should be allowed to help others entering into the restoration process.

The purpose of discipline is restoration; ". . . restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (Gal 6:1 NKJV). . . "Go after those who take the wrong way. Be tender with sinners, but not soft on sin. The sin itself stinks to high heaven" (Jude 23 The Message). The purpose of restoration is Christian fellowship: ". . . you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (2 Cor 2:7).

One purpose of Christian fellowship is ministry: ". . . that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other" (1 Cor 12:25). Restoration of character is a process that takes time, brings periods of agony, but bears much fruit when completed. The words of Nehemiah should be remembered . . .

Neh 2:20

20 But I replied, "The God of heaven will help us succeed. We his servants will start rebuilding this wall. NLT

Neh 2:20

"The God-of-Heaven will make sure we succeed. We're his servants and we're going to work, rebuilding. (from THE MESSAGE)

Rebuilding a broken life demands the rebuilding of character. If the rebuilding is Biblical . . . it will succeed!

Let's pray . . .

Father, You are mighty and just, all powerful, all knowing, and everywhere present. You have blessed me abundantly and I know that every good thing I have or have ever had, has come by You. I know I am not nearly as much like Jesus as You would like. I fall short and I know it. The problem is me. I'm not thinking as You would have me think; right now I am asking You to help me change and become more like Jesus. I know change needs to take place and I can not do it on my own . . . I need Your loving touch, Your disciplining hand, Your faultless counsel and the spiritual power that Your Holy Spirit provides.

Father, please forgive me for trying to change in my own strength. I know I desperately need Your help. In the wonderful name of Jesus, I ask You to do Your work in me. I need You and I really do want to change. Amen.

Jesus loves you . . . so do !!

John