

Introduction: Continued discussion on character.

Character Which Glorifies God: God prepares believers during their mortal life to be able to live eternally with Him. Possessions will not go with us into eternal life – but character and holiness will. God is more concerned with character and holiness than He is with happiness, comfort, or possessions. Holy character will last forever. “Who” we are becoming as a person is vital. Jesus says preparation for eternal life should include laying up treasures in heaven. That requires godly character.

We live in a world that emphasizes fame, power, and possessions. God emphasizes holiness, obedience, and following Christ. The world’s emphasis is on individual success. God’s emphasis is on loyal relationships. A question for every believer is “do I daily strive to be more like the Jesus who laid down His life for me?”

Character is the combination of a person’s attributes, traits and abilities. It is the combined essence that defines you as the person you are. Attributes and skills can be used in either a morally good or a morally bad manner. Consider good listening skills. Good listening skills can be morally beneficial to friends who need someone to talk to about issues in their lives. But, if the one who hears private things lacks self-control, they may wrongly engage in gossip about information shared in confidence. That is morally bad.

Our calling, as the redeemed of God, is to become Christlike in character. Christians are responsible to God for their character. Ultimately, when we stand before Christ in heaven, we will be glorified and made fully like Christ in holy character. Until then we must strive for Christlikeness, though cannot in this life reach our goal. During our mortal life we are to live in reverence and respect for God in accordance with His moral law. We are to willingly give up selfish agendas, or plans to live a life of pleasure and convenience. That does not mean we cannot be happy. To the contrary, living to please God will make us happy in this life and supremely happy in the life to come.

God’s love for us is shown in His gifts of regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification. Each step is vital to developing Christlike character and holiness enabling us to live with God eternally.

Genuine Christian character involves sacrifice made possible the Holy Spirit’s enabling through faith. Christians are to be servant-oriented, not simply good, helpful people, but servants. Jesus put it very plainly. Luke 17:10: ***“So you also, when you***

have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" "More like Jesus" is to be every believer's watchword.

Believers are Responsible to God for Their Character: Character, unlike temperament, is not determined by DNA. People are accountable to God for the character they develop. Character which pleases God is morally Christlike.

Moral character is determined by consistently practicing virtues and right values. Believers are to strive to obediently add moral virtues to their lives and eliminate moral vices. From the earlier lists of moral virtues we considered, it is easy to see that a life of virtue is not easy to attain or sustain. In fact, it is impossible without the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Christian character is rooted in acknowledging that God is who He says He is, has done what He says He has done, and will do what He says He will do. In short, Christian character is based on a believer's trust in God and what He has done and is doing in their life. It calls for making conscious choices to cooperate with the Holy Spirit as He transforms our moral character to Christ likeness.

No Christian is perfect – all make mistakes, all sin. No believer attains complete Christlikeness during their mortal life. Godly character cannot be developed by only adhering to a set of legal requirements. Believers are indeed to be obedient to God's law and His other commands, but the internal work of transformation is done by the Holy Spirit. Believers are to do external things which cooperate with the internal work of transformation as it is carried on by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Believers are to walk in step with the Spirit as He works inner transformation.

Two Examples of People with Godly Character: There are many examples of godly character in the Bible. Two examples are found in Philippians 2:19-30: ***"I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. ²⁰ For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹ For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. ²² But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. ²³ I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, ²⁴ and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.***

²⁵ I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, ²⁶ for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and

not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸ I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. ²⁹ So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, ³⁰ for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me”

In this passage Paul praises Timothy and Epaphroditus as men of great value to him. In verse 22 the ESV has Paul praising Timothy’s “proven worth.” The NKJV says “proven character.” Both are correct, but the NKJV captures the fact that it is Timothy’s proven character that enables his proven worth to Paul. Likewise, it is Epaphroditus’ proven character Paul emphasizes in encouraging the Philippian church to receive him in the Lord with all joy. Paul says the church should honor such men who are willing to die to further the work of Christ. These are men of godly character.

Paul says Timothy is unusual among men in that his concern for the Philippians welfare will be genuine, not just for show. Paul’s observation is that many, if not most people, are more interested in their own interests than those of Christ, but Timothy is not like that. This is high praise indeed for Timothy’s compassion and commitment to Christ.

Paul is pleased with Timothy’s “proven character.” Timothy is a person of honor and integrity whom you can depend on in difficult times. He consistently lives up to what he says he will do. God is pleased with the Timothy’s of this world.

Both Timothy and Epaphroditus worked with Paul and provided support Paul was pleased to have. Even the most gifted among us need help. God intends us to work with one another. We are stronger and more effective working as a team.

Character Flaws: Tim Keller asks a question to make an interesting point about character in his book **The Reason for God**. He asks if Christianity is true, why do so many non-Christians seemingly live more moral lives than many Christians? The moral failings of some Christian leaders are well-known. In-fighting and party spirit seem as common in church communities as in other organizations. Non-Christians ask, if Christianity is true, “Shouldn’t Christians on the whole be much better people than everyone else?” Keller points out that this perspective involves a mistaken assumption based on misunderstanding what Christianity teaches about itself. Two major points.

(1.) Christianity, through the doctrine of **common grace**, teaches that all people receive from God gifts which encourage moral acts of goodness and justice. Scripture says, *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the*

Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). No matter who performs it, every act of goodness, wisdom, justice, and beauty is empowered by God. God gives good gifts of wisdom, talent, beauty, and skill ‘graciously’ – that is, in a completely unmerited way. He distributes common grace gifts to all humanity, independent of religious conviction, race, gender, or other attributes. He gives the gifts to enrich, brighten and preserve human life.

(2.) The church is a healing place for imperfect sinners not a place of safety for perfect saints. ***“And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.’”*** (Mark 2:17). Every Christian’s character is so damaged and flawed that through their own power and merit they would be unable to establish a right relationship with God. The God-Man, Jesus Christ, lived a perfect life under God’s law. Though He was without sin, He willingly died to pay the penalty due under the law for sin for all those who believe. After 3 days, He was resurrected.

In this way He atoned for the sins of those being redeemed and made it possible for redeemed sinners to be restored to right relationship with God by faith in Christ through grace, independent of the Law. This means the truth is that the church, as a whole, will always be filled with recovering sinners, immature and broken people who must grow emotionally, morally, and spiritually to become “like Christ.”

People, who are drawn by the grace of God into the church, are often broken and morally flawed to a greater extent than many people outside the church. As C.S. Lewis points out, unless you know the detailed history of people including their physical, psychological, and mental status, you cannot reasonably compare the moral character of a new Christian to that of a non-Christian. If the new Christian experienced more past trauma and brokenness than the non-Christian, you should not be surprised that the new Christian seems to not have as good moral character as the non-Christian. But the moral direction of change for the new Christian has been set in the right direction and will have an assured result. New Christians are on a path to become like Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and assured of ultimate glorification (Romans 8:28-30). Character flaws in Christians will ultimately be corrected.

Character Traits in Action can be Either Good or Bad: Any given character traits can work either as a good trait or a bad trait depending on self-control. Earlier we mentioned being a good listener as an example of a trait that can be used for good or can be abused. Here are a few other examples. Alertness is a good trait. But alertness gone wrong is a bad trait that can produce quick biting criticism and presumptive judgment. Decisiveness is a good trait, but if used wrongly may become inflexibility which is almost always bad. Sincerity is a good trait but can become

gullibility. Honesty can become indiscretion and tactlessness. Creativity can become deviousness and unfruitful daydreaming. Compassion can become sentimentalism. Being analytical can become picky pettiness. Discretion can become timidity and unhealthy secret keeping.

Examples of Character Traits God Expects in Believers: God expects every believer to develop good character traits including: (1.) Compassion which is a genuine concern for the needs and rights of people. Love is the key to this trait. (2.) Consistency which signifies integrity. Private life and public image should agree with one another. Consistently striving to be godly is the overall goal. (3.) Cooperation with other believers. Put on the whole armor of God and work with others. No “lone rangers” in God’s Kingdom. (4.) Commitment to Christ and His Kingdom. The Christian life can be costly in many ways, but it is well worth whatever it takes. Keep your eyes on Jesus who willingly gave His life for us. (5.) Courage means strength in the face of pain or grief. Willing to stand up for the kingdom of God in the face of opposition. (6.) Perseverance means standing fast under trials, withstanding any inclination to quit under duress. These are all traits God expects believers to “put on.

Persevering: Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred by the Romans in 156 A.D. He was a disciple of the Apostle John and John had ordained him Bishop. John lived until about 100 A.D. Polycarp was a young man when he became Bishop, but an old man when he was arrested in 156 A.D. He was sentenced to be burned at the stake for his devotion to Christ.

The Roman proconsul took pity on Polycarp and urged him to recant. For Polycarp to live, all he had to do was say, “Caesar is Lord,” and offer incense to Caesar. He didn’t even have to be sincere. He just had to publicly acknowledge Caesar as worthy of worship. Polycarp responded to the proconsul: *“Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked.”* For his refusal, Polycarp was burned at the stake. When he was slow to die, he was pierced with a spear. Polycarp’s statement about having served Christ for 86 years could mean either that he was 86 years old, or that he had lived 86 years after his conversion. We don’t know which is true.

Quote from Reagan: President Ronald Reagan made a striking statement about character. It is a warning that everyone should be steadfast in developing good character traits and eliminating bad ones. Constant effort necessary to develop and maintain good character. He said, *“The character that takes command in moments of*

crucial choices has already been determined. It has been determined by a thousand other choices made earlier in seemingly unimportant moments. It has been determined by all those “little” choices of years past – by all those times when the voice of conscience was at war with the voice of temptation, whispering a lie that ‘it doesn’t really matter.’ It has been determined by all the day-to-day decisions made when life seemed easy and crises seemed far away, the decisions that, piece by piece, bit by bit, developed habits of discipline or of laziness; habits of self-sacrifice or self-indulgence; habits of duty and honor and integrity – or dishonor and shame.”

Conclusion: Every believer is to develop Christlike character. That goal is established by God. From Scripture, we know a long list of godly attributes. Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, forgiveness; focusing thoughts on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy; helping the poor, the weak, and the unfortunate; doing unto others as we would have others do to us; persevering in pursuit of righteousness, godliness, faith, and love; honor our word, having integrity, keeping promises even when it hurts; be temperate in all things, dignified, sensible, living honestly, speaking the truth, setting an example in speech, conduct, and purity; quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry; hospitable and generous, willing to share with others; live by it is more blessed to give than to receive.

There are other good, useful attributes such as creativity, flexibility, alertness, focus, decisiveness, etc. which are useful but not essential to godly character.

No Christian is perfect during mortal life. All make mistakes, all sin, none are completely Christlike. But Christians are being transformed toward Christlikeness. Ultimately, they will be glorified and like Christ.

Outward actions which display evidence of godly character originate in our innermost being. It is in our “heart” is where godly character develops. A redeemed relationship with God including the indwelling of the Holy Spirit makes godly character development possible. Christians are to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, striving to do things corresponding with His gracious work within them, and avoiding doing, thinking, or saying things that grieve or quench Him.

Individual Christian responsibility includes working to understand what godly character looks like. Believers are to make decisions and act consistent with that understanding. We are to consistently pray God will illuminate our understanding, enable our actions, and direct our path.

Individual responsibility for developing godly character includes “putting on” right moral decisions. That means, even if it is not what you want to do, make right moral decisions over and over again until you have developed habits of righteousness. The Holy Spirit will honor that “putting on” effort by changing you in your innermost being so that righteous choices are what you truly want to do. He must make the necessary “in the heart” changes which we cannot do. We must cooperate with Him by putting on the external actions which would accompany genuine godly traits, which is all we are able to do.

Step-by-step we put off the old nature and put on the “form” of the new nature. “Putting off” the old nature and “putting on” the new requires actions that do not come naturally. We cannot stop bad desires from coming into our mind. But we are enabled to refuse to gratify those desires. Persistently refusing to make bad desires manifest is essential. Breaking bad habits and replacing them with good ones is never easy. The process of “building forms” we discussed earlier helps break bad habits and develop good habits for what we think about, say, and do.

The quote from President Reagan is important. The character which controls today’s actions is the result of uncountable choices made in the past. Becoming Christlike in character requires getting rid of inappropriate character traits and adding good character traits. New Christians typically (and rightfully) focus on eliminating bad traits. But the bad must be replaced by the good.

In Romans, we learn that transformation from our present condition to godly character proceeds through the renewing of our mind. Outwardly taking off the sinful actions and putting on godly actions cooperates with the Holy Spirit as He transforms our inner being. He fills the forms of righteousness we have constructed with the true essence of genuine righteousness. Each step moves us closer to Christlike character. Achieving that goal is ultimately accomplished by the Holy Spirit when He glorifies us.

What’s Next? Discussion of the human soul, what happens at mortal death, and what the intermediate state is like in that period before we receive our resurrection body.