

Temperament, Character, and Spiritual Gifts

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1. **Introduction**: Our character affects everyone and everything we come in contact with. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “Character is destiny.” Good character is not inborn. It must be developed. Disciplined training of thought, speech, emotions, and actions is required. Everyone has a God-given conscience which causes us to feel good when we do what we know is right and to feel bad when we do what we know to be wrong. The first step then is to understand “right and wrong.” In lesson 8 we examined Aristotle’s 12 virtues and other measures of good character. Our focus tonight will be developing good character.
2. **Developing Good Character**: Developmental psychologist Thomas Lickona says good character signifies right moral knowing, feeling, reasoning, and acting. He means the intellect should know and understand what is morally right, the emotions should support what is morally right, and the will should act decisively on what is morally right. This is a useful practical definition.
3. **Four True Stories**: Here are four thought-provoking true stories about incidents which provide insight into some good and bad character traits. Each story involves a particular person in a testing situation. What do we learn about character from each incident?

(1.) The first incident was in Massachusetts.

A teenager spotted a wallet on the sidewalk in front of a local pharmacy. He went inside, bought a magazine, gave the clerk the wallet, and said “someone lost this.” The wallet’s owner was identified, called and came hurrying to the store where he offered a reward to the teenager for returning it. “I can’t take the money,” he said. “I was a schmuck and kept this.” He pulled twenty dollars out of his pocket and returned it. This eighteen-year-old had only occasional jobs as a landscaper and said the money would have been nice to help pay the rent “I’m sorry I tried to steal it,” he told the wallet’s owner and added, “Morality really messes with you. But that’s a good thing.” He knew what was right. his conscience nagged him until he did it.

(2.) Another incident occurred in Atlanta.

A woman discovered a wallet in the food court of a busy mall. She almost turned it into mall security but thought that “maybe somebody would take the money out of it,” so instead she called the owner of the wallet. She told him her parents had taught her to be honest, but she hadn’t learned the lesson right away. She said, “I found a purse one time. I returned it, but I kept twenty dollars from it.” Then she said, “That twenty dollars bugged me so bad I swore that if I ever had the chance again, I’d do the right thing.”

(3.) A third incident happened in Las Vegas.

A neatly dressed young man saw a billfold in front of a hotel, reached down, picked it up, and glanced at the people around him. He went in the hotel, possibly trying to decide what to do, looked around, left that hotel, walked into another where he looked the security guards over and left once more. Outside again, he stuck the wallet in his front pocket, walked on down the street passing several policemen, and was lost in the crowd. The wallet was never

returned. That young man seemed to know it was right to return the wallet to its owner and appeared to think about doing so – but in the end he chose to do the wrong thing.

(4.) **A fourth incident happened in Los Angeles**

Two teenage boys discovered a wallet in a mall. One boy pulled the money out and yelled with joy. Then they both talked at once as they walked off through the mall. After a few minutes they encountered and talked to a man who appeared to be one boy's father. The man and the two boys left the mall and the owner of the wallet was never called. Neither the boys nor the man demonstrated in any way that they knew or cared about what was right.

4. **The Source of These True Stories:** They were part of a 1995 experiment by the editors of Reader's Digest. The goal was to see how Americans would respond when faced with a choice of keeping or returning something that obviously did not belong to them. They dropped a total of 120 wallets in several cities. Only 80 were returned, and of those, only 55 came back with their contents unchanged.

The experiment seemed to demonstrate most people have an active conscience (one element of good character) even though they don't always follow it. The ones who intended to keep the money usually glanced about nervously and tried to conceal the wallet. Their actions revealed that they knew they were doing something wrong.

5. **Lickona's Right Moral Knowing, Feeling, Reasoning, and Acting:** With these stories as background, think about Lickona's four essential components of good character – right moral knowing, feeling, reasoning, and actions.

A. **Moral Knowing:** This is discernment which reveals the necessity for a moral decision plus a clear understanding of moral values. It includes a sensitivity to the perspective of others affected by the moral situation and ability to reason morally. It requires willingness and ability to make decisions and act on those decisions. Moral awareness recognizes the distinct difference between fact (what is) and value (what ought to be). Moral knowing includes knowing one's own strengths and weaknesses. Such self-knowledge requires an honest self-examination of attitudes, motives, behavior, strengths, and weaknesses.

Facts specify something about the way things really are. For example: The sky is cloudy this afternoon. Jane is 5 feet tall. Bobby pushed Sue and she fell, The printer is out of paper.

Moral values specify the way things ought to be – what we ought and ought not to do. For example: Don't murder. Don't lie. Don't steal. Be kind to others. Be truthful. Clear moral values mean having well-defined values enabling distinguishing right from wrong and knowing how to apply the values in different circumstances.

Preferences are different from either facts or moral values. Preference simply express our likes and dislikes. Examples: I'd rather have water than coffee. I prefer everything organized. I don't want to go to the garden show today. I like classical music. Preferences are non-moral

values carrying no obligation and not involving right or wrong. They are morally neutral. It is important to keep in mind the distinction between facts, values, and preferences.

Moral values enable us to differentiate between right and wrong. Core moral values include honesty, compassion, perseverance, courage, humility, responsibility, respect, and tolerance of morally neutral things like temperament differences. There are virtues whose performance fulfill the intent of values.

Understanding the perspective of others affected by the moral situation is primarily concerned with respect for other people and acting to meet their legitimate needs.

B. Moral Feeling: Moral knowing is not enough. It is never enough to merely know what is right. A person must also care about what is right. Knowing what is right and wanting to do it are necessary but not sufficient elements of good character.

Moral feeling is an active appreciation for what is right, making it easier to set aside other feelings and focus on the desire to do what is right. Moral feeling validates moral knowing and motivates moral reasoning and action. The primary drivers for moral feeling are conscience, self-respect, and empathy.

Conscience is the inward feeling of obligation to do what is right. “Morality messed with me,” admitted the young man who took twenty dollars from the wallet he found. The “morality” that bothered him was his conscience. Conscience causes feelings of guilt when we either contemplate or do something we know is wrong.

Self-respect is belief in your own worth and dignity. The worth and dignity of Christians is derived from who they are in Christ. A healthy and proper self-respect for others is important both in making right choices and in treating other people with respect.

Empathy is the ability and inclination to identify with and understand another person’s feelings. Empathy encourages doing for other people, particularly those hurting or in need.

Moral feeling, then, has to do with our emotions, how we interpret and deal with them.

C. Moral reasoning: This is the ability to answer “why” questions about moral situations. Requires understanding values and logic. Moral reasoning lets us answer questions like: I found a wallet. Why should I return it and all its contents to the owner? Why should I fight for my country? Why should I be accurate and truthful in filing my taxes? Why should I put forth my best effort at work? Why should I be faithful to my spouse?

Given a situation that requires a moral decision, deciding what ought to be done and then doing it is the purpose of all the other factors. Before a moral decision is made, (1.) we need to be aware a moral judgment is required, (2.) know which moral values apply, (3.) account for others affected by our judgment, and (4.) assess our motives, strengths, and weaknesses. Then we are prepared to decide what course of action is best.

Good moral decision-making requires figuring out options, determining likely consequences, and evaluating options from both a moral and practical standpoint. Then, among morally acceptable options, we determine which options are likely to be best in overall consequences? Often there is not enough time to think through this process. For that reason, we must train ourselves to react morally. That requires training and practice.

Moral knowledge and moral feeling should lead to moral action, but unfortunately don't always do so. One major stumbling block is moral action is often unpopular and may even be dangerous. Moral action often requires courage and being willing to be different, a willingness to be the one person who stands firm on what is right.

D. **Moral Action**: Right action is the goal of all the components of good character. Right moral action requires competence, willpower and trained good habits. Moral competence requires well developed skills and abilities for converting thinking and feeling into moral behavior. Courage is necessary, as is, being respectful, responsible, and self-controlled. Emotions must be under control. No flying off the handle, shouting, and ranting.

Moral action includes being honest and truthful, not rationalizing or trying to justify your own or anyone else's bad or unhealthy behaviors. Moral willpower is a combination of determination and trained self-discipline enabling overcoming difficulties and temptations and doing the right thing even when it hurts. Good habits are action or behavior patterns that by repetition have become regular and often unconscious. Being truthful, loyal, brave, and kind as a habit will protect against desires to do the opposite.

6. **Summary**: Four components of good character are moral knowing, feeling, reasoning, and acting – knowing the good, desiring the good, reasoning about alternatives, and doing the good. Good character enables us to judge what is right, to care deeply about what is right, to reason about alternatives, and to consistently strive to do what is right and best.
7. **Umbrella Decisions**: An important way of developing good moral habits is to make judicious umbrella decisions. We have seen that Six elements – awareness, values, considering others, reasoning, self-knowledge, and decision-making – constitute the intellectual components or moral knowing necessary for good character. Well-developed habitual responses are both useful and necessary in situations where there is no time available for detailed analysis. While all six elements are useful and necessary for complex moral situations, a simple umbrella decision process will handle many situations.

An example of an umbrella decision is “I will not take anything that does not belong to me.” Another is “I will be faithful to my marriage vows.” “I will spend time with each of my children on a regular scheduled basis.” You will think of many other possibilities. Many years ago, Lou Ann and I made an umbrella decision that it was our intent to be in church every Sunday. God has honored that decision. We seldom miss a Sunday. In 10 years of teaching Sunday School in Colorado Springs, while having to travel all over the world on business, I missed only a couple of Sundays per year.

8. **Our Obedience, God's Provision:** Every choice we face between what we should do or should not do is an opportunity for building good character. Even when we don't "feel like" or "want" to do what we know to be right, if we do it anyway in obedience to God, we are building the "form" of a good character trait. God honors that obedience by replacing the "form" with the real thing.

Good character is built on integrity and positive moral strength. Good character requires the proper and consistent use of the intellect, emotions, and will. Believers are predestined to be conformed to a likeness of Christ (Rm. 8:29). Christian character includes "good character" but that is insufficient to be Christ-like in character. Scripture provides understanding, life is the training ground both developing for and using good character. Developing Christ-like character is not optional for believers. Growth in Christ-like character is expected of every Christian and made possible by the ongoing work of the indwelling Holy Spirit.