

Developing Christian Character

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The dictionary defines character as “good traits and qualities.” We look around at people and judge for ourselves whether or not they have character. What do you think, for example, about the “Coronation Street” characters? Character is often an indication whether or not a person has “finer feelings”, that is, whether or not they are conscious of life beyond the material, the banal, the pursuit of everything that serves themselves. People who have character may not be Christians, but they may be God-fearing. Even those who began their lives in selfishness can have it refined out of them by hardship. But even then, some people do not develop character: they have had experience, but are not experienced. The old should have character, but then, the old are not always wise.

Christians may not have character either. Following Christ certainly develops character, but it is a process. We start with a clean slate at conversion, so for a brand-new Christian it may take some time for those good traits and qualities to develop. Christians who do not seriously follow Christ—who do not continue in Jesus’ word—tend not to have developed characters. But Christians are in a position to overtake the rest of humanity in the development of character because God in Christ is involved. It has become a supernatural process in which we become Christ-like, like Christ, like God, more like the children of our heavenly Father.

Which family likeness predominates in your life? The characteristics of your human ancestry, the fallen, selfish nature, or the likeness of the God who is all-good? The Bible has many references to character, under various groupings, a small selection of which follows:

Galatians 5:16-25: We must co-operate with God

Paul writes to the churches in Galatia who, behind his back, had reverted to the doctrine of justification by faith and works, prompted by itinerant Jewish Christians. He draws the distinction that there is a sinful nature and a spiritual nature, with one warring against the other—like the good dog and the bad dog. He lists the bad qualities of the sinful nature: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery (depraved self-indulgence), idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like. These belong to those not yet regenerated by the Spirit of God.

Against this he lists the “fruit of the Spirit”—those qualities that grow from a tree that is rooted in Christ and whose life-sap produces fruit. These are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. In an allusion to the cross, he says that those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified, or put to death, the sinful nature with its passions and desires—a theme he develops thoroughly in his letter to the Romans.

How do we develop the good qualities at the expense of the bad qualities? We feed the good dog and starve the bad dog. As we cooperate with the Spirit’s prompting to refrain from certain attitudes and actions, the good qualities, the fruit, grows and we become more like Christ in to whose life we have tapped.

So we freely receive the ability to have good qualities, but we must work at them. That is why Paul says that we must “work out” or own salvation—work at

being Christ-like. Some say, therefore that this is “sanctification by works”, but it is still by faith. In most letters Paul prays that his readers will have the grace of God.

1 Timothy 4:7-16: We must train ourselves to be godly

Background: to Timothy, one of Paul’s helpers, a young man needing encouragement. Paul sets his instructions against the conditions of “later times” when people will abandon the faith and follow the teaching of demons. He instructs Timothy to point out the goodness of God in giving freedom. By doing this he will be a good servant of Christ, brought up and therefore teaching the truths of the faith.

By contrast, he must reject godless myths and old wives’ tales—the profane and worthless. He was to train himself to be godly. Unlike physical training which is of some value (its success fades with age) godliness is valuable now and in the future life. Timothy is to set an example for the believers in what he says, in life, love, faith and in purity. Strongly associated with Timothy’s character development was the instruction to devote himself to reading Scripture to the people, to preaching it and teaching it. He is to watch his life and doctrine closely. In this way he would save both himself and his hearers, not for salvation, but for fruitfulness and quality of life.

So we conclude from these two passages already that although we have the Spirit of God living within us producing Christlike urges in us, we must work at it. How do we work at it?

James 1:2-12: We should regard circumstances as God’s testing our faith

James, writing to a wide, Christian readership who were about to be persecuted under the Emperor Nero in A.D. 64. He wanted to prepare them, and to help them with their attitude to the circumstances that would shortly assail them. He was answering the questions, “Where is God when I need him?” “Why is God tempting me?” even before they were asked.

He told them that their faith would be tested, but that no temptation ever came from God. He said that having one’s faith tested would lead to the good quality of perseverance, or endurance. In the end, when the test was over, the people who submitted to the will of God and maintained a good attitude in the face of difficulty, would be mature—“grown up” as we say, and complete, not lacking anything. That is a nice place to be, but it is arrived at only by a rugged route. Judy and I have our personal difficulties from which we cannot escape unless by overcoming them by faith. Judy has had cancer. She has one kind of fear. I have suffered and continue to suffer the fear of losing her. We are having our faith tested daily.

Further (v12) he said that the person who has stood the test without wavering would receive “the crown of life” that God promised them. The crown *is* life itself. As one commentator puts it: “The life which is promised is probably life here and now, life in its fulness, life in its completeness.” A quality of life.

James points out that God tempts no-one. It is the lower nature that drags us down so that we give in to temptation.

Then there follows a list of good qualities to nurture: being quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. Act according to the implanted word. Keep a tight rein on the tongue, which he mentions several times, look after people in distress. There is a passage about heavenly wisdom: (3:17) purity in wisdom, peace-loving wisdom, considerate wisdom, submissive wisdom, mercy-full and fruit-full

wisdom, impartial and sincere wisdom. And for every positive attitude James mentions the obverse, all those bad qualities, which we will mercifully skip over.

Romans 5:1-5: We should rejoice because our suffering produces character

Paul lists suffering and its effects in his letter to his beloved Roman Christian brothers and sisters—whom he had not yet seen. He says that in the grace of God which is now ours because of the reconciliation between man and God that Christ achieved on the cross, we can rejoice. And that means that we can also rejoice in our sufferings (v3) because they produce in us good qualities—character. This is a parallel thought to those in James' letter. Suffering, wrote Paul, produces perseverance. Perseverance, in turn, produces character. That's what James said. But Paul goes farther. Character produces hope. That's not a vague uncertain expectation, like, "I hope so." But I know so, as in John's first letter. Hope in turn is turned into love, a process supported by God who fulfils it all by his Spirit who has been poured into us at conversion. And he goes on to magnify the love of God. Suffering produces good qualities—character.

Hebrews 12:1-13: We should remember the sufferings of Christ

The New International Version of the Bible succinctly heads this section of teaching "God disciplines his sons." The Hebrew Christians, in an area like Cyrene, surrounded by Jews, were being tempted to abandon their faith in Christ and return to their ancestral roots. Using allusions to Old Testament history, the writer urges his readers to consider Christ as superior to it all, and to stay with him as the Messiah.

The opposition these Christians were receiving was nothing to the opposition the great heroes of faith of Chapter 11 put up with. Nevertheless the suffering was real, but it should be viewed as a discipline, or training from God. God trains every believer; it shows that they are really his sons. Only the illegitimate Roman children would have no inheritance rights. So our attitude, as God trains us in character, should be to remember the sufferings of Jesus on the cross, and that they led to his taking his place at the right hand of the throne of God. We should not grow weary of God's discipline, or lose heart. Christ suffered much more than we, and won the battle. The writer quotes from Psalm 94:12 as he says:

"My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the Lord disciplines those he loves,
and accepts everyone he accepts as a son."

God disciplines us so that he can develop in us character.

2 Peter 1:3-11: We must make every effort to know Christ better

Peter says God has given us the word of God, those great and precious promises, that will enable us to escape the world's corruption and participate in the divine nature. That is all we need, he says (v 3). But we must also "make every effort" to add to our faith a following list of good qualities. These are: faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, love. (I see these not as a "random sampling in no particular order", but as a progression—one leading to the production of the next.)

The possession of these qualities, says Peter, will prevent us from being ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the situation explained negatively. Postively, Peter says that we must be "all the more

eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome” into heaven. Nothing done for Christ, whether outwardly in service, or inwardly in cooperation with the Spirit’s training, will be in vain, or without reward in heaven.

My reaction:

- I am reluctant to give up my un-Christian thought patterns and actions.
- I am afraid that God might break me by his discipline.
- I don’t think I could measure up to God’s standards of holiness.

If you think like that, then you are not alone. You are in the company of every other Christian who faces this issue.

We are all reluctant to change from the ways of the old nature to the ways of the new. The old is so satisfying, so comfortable, so familiar—and so *vain*. So vain that Christ had to redeem us from those vain ways. We just need to realise that.

The more timid of us, who perhaps had a childhood in which love was doled out only after we had met a certain standard, may fear the hand of God. But the hand of God is not like the hand of man. God is gentle, understanding. He loves us whether we perform or not. He is there when we turn away, and still there when we return because Christ is always on the job to reconcile the imperfect to the perfect. We see the understanding of God in Psalm 139, which surely is a psalm for those with an inferiority complex:

- “You are familiar with all my ways . . .
- “For you created my inmost being . . .
- “Search me, O God, and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts . . .”

Those of us who were brought up to perform well, perfectly in fact, realise that it is true that they could never measure up to God’s standards of holiness. But nobody could, or can. That is why the Lord Jesus appears before God and excuses us on the merits of his shed blood. Further, we have the Spirit of God within us, and as we drink in the word of God we are given power to be what we could not otherwise be.

We should help one another

There is no excuse for not cooperating with God’s discipline. And note that this is *God’s work and God’s timing, but we should help one another*. Paul and Peter and James had no compunction about reminding the Christians about the process and the high standard of behaviour required of them. The apostle John said, “If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death [rejection of Christ] he should pray and God will give him life.” So we pray for one another. I pray for you. I hope you pray for me. Solomon said: “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17). He said: “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). We should “carry one another’s burdens.” “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1, 2). The church works by everyone exercising his or her gift, which may include exhorting one another to live according to the plan of God. “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart

that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sins' deceitfulness" (Hebrews 3:12, 13).

When it becomes too hard to endure, we just should do as the writer to the Hebrews urged:

"Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith . . . consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

A prayer of commitment

The Celtic monks who sought solitude for meditation produced pioneers who left the comfort of their own lands to settle in far-off places such as Iceland, long before it was colonised by Norwegian Vikings. One such monk was Patrick (389-461). He was probably the monk who did the most to evangelise Ireland and the Celtic peoples by training others to do the job (2 Timothy 2:2). Paul said that we should *put on the breastplate of righteousness* (Ephesians 6:14). This final word is Patrick's, entitled:

Patrick's Breastplate

I bind unto myself today
The strong name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One, and One in Three.

I bind this day to me forever,
By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
His baptism in the Jordan river;
His death on cross for my salvation.
His bursting from the spiced tomb;
His riding up the heav'nly way;
His coming at the day of doom;
I bind unto myself today.

I bind unto myself today
The power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, his might to stay,
His ear to hearken to my need;
The wisdom of my God to teach,
His hand to guide, his shield to ward,
The word of God to give me speech,
His heav'nly host to be my guard.

Against all Satan's spells and wiles,
Against false words of heresy,
Against the knowledge that defiles,
Against the heart's idolatry,
Against the wizard's evil craft,
Against the death-wound and the burning,
The choking wave, the poison'd shaft,
Protect me, Christ, till thy returning.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me.
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

I bind unto myself the name,
The strong name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three,
Of whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word.
Praise to the Lord of my salvation:
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.

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