

Character Counts – Part 2

The last time we spoke on character, I used a contrast between King Saul and King David to help us see the difference between image and character.

If you will remember, even Samuel was focussed on the external image. After meeting all but one of Jesse's sons, God had to tell Samuel, *Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.* 1 Sa 16:7

(This happens after the Bible makes a point of mentioning Saul's height several times)

Character issues are heart issues. And this is what the Lord regards as the fundamental part of our spiritual development. So let me encourage you to spend more time and energy and thought and yes, even money in the cultivation of character. Study this topic. Buy books. Hook up with a mentor and tell him or her you need character development. That would make for an interesting discussion! However you do it, make character development one of your main pursuits. Make it your life-long obsession. Because I guarantee you, it will drive you to Jesus Christ.

The first commitment that this requires is to live an examined life. Many people really don't like looking inward. For some, having an intensive look within is like sending a child into a dark basement. It can be a scary place. But the reality is that each of us have fearsome beasts and ghosts and goblins living in the basement that we would sooner deny or ignore than face up to. But we forget that the Lord goes with us. And we are going there to see things through His eyes.

Sometimes a crisis will force us to do this. Listen to Job's word in Job 7

*“What is man that you make so much of him,
that you give him so much attention,
18 that you **examine** him every morning
and test him every moment?
19 Will you never look away from me,
or let me alone even for an instant? Job 7:17–19*

The Psalmist

*Surely you desire truth in the **inner parts**,
you teach me wisdom in the **inmost place.** Ps 51*

*O LORD, you have **searched** me
and you know me.
2 You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar. Ps 139:1-2*

***Search** me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting. Ps 139:23-24*

So I want to start at the foundation of Christian character building. Somewhat beginnerish.

hang in there, and hopefully you will see that this is relevant to all of us.

Conversion - the Spiritual Foundation to Christian Character.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.

This is a true and objective statement about all who have been born again.

One of the first things we need to clarify is the question: What is new about becoming a Christian? And what does this have to do with developing Christian character? Because I am sure that you have met non-Christians who are pretty decent characters. Some whose character qualities I have envied. So what's the difference? What is about the believer that is different once he or she is born again
Quick answer? Everything.

Divide into groups to discuss this question.

1. The convert undergoes a radical change
 - a. Relationship changes from enmity to Love and Grace with the Creator. You have been adopted into the father's family (Read Eph 1:3-10).
 - b. Indwelling of the Holy Spirit who empowers the new believer to this change. Fruit of the Spirit which I believe is the core of Christian character
 - c. Many new realities – new world view, new purpose, new hope, new family, new love, all of which have a part in developing Christian character

Please note, this new creation (Christian character being a crucial aspect of this) is an act of God. We are called to cooperate, but this is all a work of God the Holy Spirit.

Two things to remember:

Conversion is an event

Conversion is a process

Unfortunately, evangelicalism has made conversion an event to the extent that many evangelicals have forgotten the process part.

I have pastored many people who have forgotten the process part.

(Use the illustration of a man, after his wife died.)

After his loving wife died, he spent every day in his room, staring out the window, and asking himself, "What did I do to deserve the loss of my wife? My life is over. No joy. No purpose.

At the end of his life, he could not get out of his funk, and he could not pray.

He never really understood what following Christ really meant. His faith did not have the power to carry him over that crisis, and he died a sad and lonely man, full of self-pity.

What went wrong?

He was a typical evangelical Christian, who literally walked an aisle in response to an invitation to accept Christ, and who did his duty in church and at home, was a faithful husband and was a good man, but NO ONE ever disciplined him, mentored him, taught Him that Christ intends to build character in him that would radiate the glory of God to the world.

So, I am talking about process when we talk about ONGOING CONVERSION. Or perhaps a more biblical word is 'sanctification'

I continue to discover areas in my life that are in need of repentance and conversion. In other words, I need to relate the gospel to those areas of my life where character is lacking.

This is why I insist in my counseling and mentoring of others that **repentance entails more than merely saying ‘I’m sorry’** to God and to others! It can be a lengthy and painful process because the presenting sinful tendencies that one needs to repent of is most often a manifestation of stuff below the surface that needs to be addressed. Or to put it another way, those areas where we typically succumb to temptation are an indication of a lack of Christian character.

So the first step in developing character is actually a step down. A descending staircase, if you will. In order to look at the foundations, we need to visit the basement.

Now, I want to stop being theoretical. So let’s get practical. (It’s what you often ask for)
I want to involve you in another small group exercise.
Look around you, and form groups of three or four.

How many of you can think of an episode in your life where you blew it? Can you remember the details?
I want you to think back to a time when you had a difficulty, and you know YOU blew it. You were clearly in the wrong. And perhaps this is where you characteristically blow it. Or perhaps you weren’t in the wrong, but you reacted poorly to someone else offending you and you always react poorly to this situation. Perhaps you are easily offended and you hit back, or want to.

Now with that situation in mind, imagine that now you are standing in front of Jesus, and He asks you this question: Why did you choose not to be like me in that situation? What kept you from following me in that circumstance?
First let me share one of my weak areas, just to break a trail here. When it comes to a major decision, I will characteristically make my wife feel as if she knows less than I do about a situation. And she picks up on that, and it sometimes turns into an argument. My problem is impatience with a touch of German arrogance and some chauvinism thrown into the mix. Basically, I want what I want, and I will take the shortest path to get there, and that short path doesn’t include a lot of dialogue.

How would I answer the question, “Why was I not more Christ-like in these situations?”

1. Usually it’s because I did not bring the matter to the Lord in the first place. Indicative of a lack of what character quality that should be there?
2. Impatient – what character flaw does impatience point to?

See what I am doing?
Can you do this in small groups?

What would you say?
Some will say - I wasn’t thinking about you at the time. I wasn’t aware or conscious enough of your involvement in my life.
-I had a twinge of conscience, but disregarded it because I wanted satisfaction. (gratification)
-I felt like I was being unfairly treated and I don’t believe it is right to be a doormat. (entitlement)
-I stood to lose some money if I had given in. She wasn’t listening to me so I had to get loud and angry. It developed into a full blown fight. (greed?)
-I was being treated like a child. (pride?)

Character Formation

I’d like to use a verse for the next section of this discussion, and I hope you will memorize these verses, or make a poster of it and put it up somewhere where you can see it every day. Phil 1:9-11

⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

A question that comes to my mind, (which you can meditate on your own time is the title of a Tina Turner song, “*What’s love got to do with it?*”) That’s for a later discussion, but make this verse a motto for your own life.

What is the purpose of love abounding in you more and more?

Why doesn't his prayer request simply ask for discernment? How does love relate to Knowledge, depth of insight and ultimately discernment?

Now let me ask you the question

What's the difference between character and action (or behaviour)?

Illustration: I am golfing. I am at the T. My golf tutor explains the components of a good drive to me. Keep your eyes on the ball. Place your feet so many inches apart. Hand grip on the handle just right. Swing back just.. etc etc. I will try to remember all those various things, and I cannot get it the first time, 2nd time 50th time. But I am getting better and better. And now, several years later, I don't think about it. I whack the ball and it goes 300 yards down the fairway. Lands on the green everytime!

Behaviour trained me to become character. (This is true of believer and non-believer alike. The difference is what kind of character you become)

I want Jesus Christ to impact me in such a way that I do not have to be self-conscious of "holy living" or "How to best represent Christ in this situation". I want godly behaviour to emanate from godly character which the Holy Spirit is producing in my life.

When I am walking, I am not aware of placing one foot in front of another. That training took place years ago.

When I am following Jesus, we need to get to the same place, where we automatically know the right thing to do, and we do it without hesitation.

OK, Please name the character quality that I need for these situations:

What do I need (without hesitation,) to stop my negative behaviour in heavy traffic? (Patience, contentment)

What do I need (without hesitation,) to NOT automatically become self-defensive when someone is giving me constructive criticism, or even non-constructive criticism?

(humility, teachability, honesty and trust (leaving your reputation in God's hands)

What do I need (without hesitation,) to look a girl in the eye, even when she is wearing revealing clothing? (temperance (self-control), love (vs lust)

What do I need (without hesitation,) to report cash gifts and honorariums to CRA that I as a pastor receive? (contentment vs greed,)

What do I need to quit watching TV 3 hours a night of spending excess time on the Internet?

What do I need to resist watching porn? (temperance (i.e. self-control). What about patience? What else?)

This all requires a shaping of character.

OK. We have a basic understanding of the difference between character and behaviour.

Now let's start talking about how this works.

Here is where we get back to the thought of an ongoing conversion.

At the centre of character development is the cross of Christ. How so?

Back to my golf swing. If I want to adopt a good golfing habit, I have to change my bad habit into a good habit. Instead of looking up to see the ball when I smack it, I need to keep my eye on the ground. Because lifting my head affects the golf swing, and changes the outcome.

In other words, I have to change my actions. That is the meaning of repentance. That is the initial step.

But an ongoing action is required. I need to consciously do it again, and again, and again, until I don't have to think about it anymore. But the big question is, where do I get the desire to keep up with my intentions?

Let me take you to some of the most practical biblical advice that there is.

1. Romans 12:1-2. *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual^a act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Can you think of anything that you do that is not done in and through your body? Absolutely everything we do and say and think involves the use of our bodies. And our bodies are the temple of the Lord. He dwells in me, and He is with me. ¹⁹ *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.* 1 Cor 6:19-20

2. Read Ephesians 5:18-20
Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the context of being careful how you live (talk about practicality) we are commanded to be filled with the Spirit. What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? How am I to be filled with the Spirit? How does being filled with the Spirit help?

So, for your personal homework, I would love it if you can think of those areas that you find difficult to overcome, and reflection the character qualities that are missing or weak in your life. And then begin to think of how to strengthen those areas. But be warned. The temptations will come on strong when you focus on those areas. The devil will see to that. (this is actually a mass discipleship exercise, and I want to encourage those of you who are formally mentoring others to use this in your one on one time with others)

^a Or *reasonable*