

# Our Reputation, Our Character

by Staff

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In nearly every high-profile political race we see in America, the issues of the election often take a back seat to the usual overwhelming concern about the personalities involved. Image consultants, tactical experts, and various other specialists are often brought in to the campaigns to "soften or strengthen" their own candidate's image, while doing everything in their power to destroy their opponent's. We frequently see candidates and their assistants using these tactics to the max, muddling the needs of their constituency with a false impression of the person who gains the office.

Since much of the world has gone from a moral philosophy to the present immoral or amoral one, how one *appears* to the world has readily overtaken the substance of who we are and what we represent. Phrases like "perception is reality" have become mantras for many who want others to view them in a positive manner without the responsibility to act accordingly. What we see is very often not what we get, but a homogenized version we see portrayed.

It is usually after the fact that these situations come to light to their fullest. As we look in life's rearview mirror, the name Adolph Hitler, for instance, brings immediate thoughts and views about who he was, what he did, and the impact that his life has had on history and the people of his time, obviously very negative. The same is true when a person talks or thinks about the person of Jesus Christ, which is usually positive. In fact, it is generally true for anyone with whom we have some connection. These people leave us with impressions or a certain impact (positive or negative) on our mind or lives. We often refer to it as their reputation.

People often associate a reputation (or a good name) as a top priority for which we should strive. In fact, our reputations should be important to us, especially as they relate to our fellow man and, of course, to God. However, as we see in many cases, reputations are often more manufactured than real. This leaves us wondering, "Is a good reputation all there is to the equation, or is there more to it?"

*Webster's New World Dictionary* defines reputation as "the estimation in which a person or thing is commonly held, whether favorable or not; its character in view of the public, community, etc." What is unfortunate about some people's limited conception of reputation is what we often see and believe about someone may or may not be "totally" who that person is. This is especially true for those to whom we have limited exposure or those who are good at hiding the "real person" behind a facade of deception, a trait evident in many circles (politics, business, religion) today.

The philosopher Elbert Hubbard probably put it in the most succinct way when we regard reputation only on its own merits: "Many a man's reputation would not know his character if they met on the street." This is especially true with people of renown (politicians, actors, athletes) whose reputations are often skewed by the media or others, often leaving an impression that may or may not be who or what that person actually is. As Hubbard reveals, the real defining aspect, character, must be defined in his reputation to get a real picture of who and what a person is, not only as he appears. In light of this, what does God have to say about our reputations and the need of character as its foundation?

**Is A Good Name Enough?**

Henry Ford once said, "You can't build your reputation on what you're going to do." In a way, this endeavor is at the heart and core of a number of biblical instructions, that is, faith and works as dual responsibilities of a Christian, law and grace as dual factors in salvation, and reputation and character as dual definitions of what we are on the outside as well as within. From this assessment, reputation should be built on and maintained by ongoing effort and not simply by perceptions, deceptions, wealth, or prestige.

Proverbs 22:1 echoes this: "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold." The word "name" comes from the Hebrew word *sheem*, which designates something as a mark or memorial of individuality, and by implication, honor, authority, or character. The King James Version (KJV) also translates it into "fame," "famous," "infamous," "named," "renown" and "report."

From this verse, we see that a good name (a combination of reputation *and* character) certainly should outweigh riches, prominence, position and status. Conversely, a lack in either can leave us in a state of moral and/or spiritual poverty, seeking self-worth over godly worth.

An example of this can be seen in those who strive for political office or a promotion. They attempt to leave an impression of character with the public or a boss, but it is an impression built on a shaky foundation of duplicity. While they may have a "good" reputation, it is not supported by the real important ingredient, character, which is earned throughout our lives.

A starkly contrasting example of this is that of Jesus Christ as a man: "[He] made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). Christ—God Himself—humbled Himself, surrendering His right to a godly reputation, yet still left the legacy of righteous character and reputation as a human.

Ecclesiastes 7:1-8 gives another example of a good name, this time compared to that of fine ointment and life and death. The chapter starts with "A good name is better than precious ointment," but goes on to say "the day of death [is better] than the day of one's birth." Ointment, in this case, symbolizes a richness or excellence that is added to a person's state, or it may represent anointing oil used to set a person or thing apart as different or special. Verse 8 concludes, "The end of a thing is better than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit."

In human terms, we know at birth we are a clean slate—we have no knowledge, understanding, wisdom, reputation, or character. Only at death, after lifelong endeavor, do we have the total life experiences to establish a good or bad name and reputation, and this occurs because of the character we have gained or failed to gain in the process.

For those who truly desire it, a good reputation and godly character is built patiently and not through devious or self-aggrandizing means. Based on this, reputation or a perceived good name is simply not enough without the character to accompany it.

### **Those Who Know Us Best?**

It is not without validity that most of our impressions or beliefs about our family, close friends, and acquaintances automatically involve knowledge about their character as a part of their reputation. Obviously, our interactions give us insight to these people's characters and reputations, whether our perceptions are true or false. Those who know us best will see any growth of character or lack of it.

Even so, some can have blind spots in relation to a particular person (for instance, a mother may ignore her son's flaws), or the person may have a talent for concealing their shortcomings, even from those closest to them.

We see a positive side of this in Acts 6:1-3, where the apostles tell the church to choose seven men to become deacons. One of the criteria was that these men were to be "of good reputation," which translates from the Greek word *martureo*, meaning "to be a witness, that is, to testify (literally or figuratively)." The KJV also renders *martureo* as "give [evidence]," "bear record," "obtain a good honest report," "be well reported of."

These men were to show evidence of God's Spirit and wisdom in their lives, a combination of a good name as well as growth in character. It is interesting that, because they knew them best, the people were to select these men according to their character.

What happened in the years after this in the early church is a mirror of circumstances we have seen in today's church. Just as in the Seven Churches in Asia (Revelation 2-3), we see churches and brethren with various reputations and character traits. Some are fairly sterling in their godly qualities, while others are criticized for striving to portray themselves as godly—often a thin veneer of reputation that hid the truth from other men but obviously not from Christ.

The same can be said of those who were to be the overseers and shepherds of the church, but who often became disillusioned and fell away or became false teachers (II Timothy 2:15-18; II John 9-10). Similar attitudes occurred in the Old Testament in corrupt men like Eli's son's (I Samuel 2:12) and Samuel's sons (I Samuel 8:1-3).

Like these churches and leaders of old, we have seen reputations and character change as people's true beliefs have revealed themselves. In these times, a person who desires to have a good reputation certainly sees the need for godly character, which many in God's church have sadly discarded or maybe never even had. When we think about various individuals or organizations that are now or once were within the church, what we perceive of their reputations often differs from the opinions we once held. This does not necessarily mean that our perceptions were incorrect, just that we may not have the ability to ascertain all of a person's strengths and weaknesses, even of those closest to us. It also shows that no one can stay stagnant; one must either grow or regress.

### **Name, Reputation, Character**

All of us are aware that names often mean something. Someone with the last name of "Smith" likely had an ironworker as an ancestor. But someone named "Melissa," which means "bee," probably did not have a bee or beekeeper on her family tree! Today, our names are not representative of our entire lifestyles, reputations, or characters. They merely identify us, not define our entire existence.

Conversely, God's many names represent His reputation and character. Faithful, Omnipotent, Merciful, Preserver, and Provider are just a few of His names that personify God's Being with traits of His character. When God promises to provide all our needs, we can call on His name, because He has proven that He will do what He says He will do.

Aphorist Benjamin Franklin declared, "Glass, china, and reputation are easily cracked, and never mended well." With God, we know this is never an issue, but for us it is often a lifelong endeavor. While most of Franklin's statement is true, when reputation is coupled with an obvious growth in

character, we can mend even a bad name, especially with God, who is the One who really counts in the end. With a truly forgiving person, we can have similar results.

Consider certain biblical characters like Jacob (renamed Israel) and Saul (renamed Paul) whose names God changed to better fit their growth (new personalities or character) in His eyes. Jacob the heel-catcher becomes a prevailer with God. Saul the desired becomes Paul the little.

Receiving a new name is a promise that God extends to those whom He calls "overcomers" in Revelation 3:12. Interestingly, the Greek word for this new name, *onoma*, means "a name or title designating authority or character."

So even God himself declares that His reputation will not be sullied or tarnished by deceivers, nonconformists, and imposters. He will save and give eternal life to overcomers and those with His character, the fruits of which Galatians 5:22-23 lists.

The famous UCLA basketball coach, John Wooden, probably said it best: "Worry more about your character than your reputation. Character is what you are, reputation merely what others think you are." In a way, he simplifies it exactly as God wants it. While we should never diminish or negate our name and reputation with unsavory actions, we can overcome a bad name if we grow in the godly characteristics we see revealed in the Bible. Even if our name, in this world, is less than stellar but tarnished because we are Christian, it is better than compromising our values in order to fit in.

Unlike the world, with its politics, games, and fantasy, we must embrace the real world where God exists. What He thinks is most important to us. Like Christ, we must be willing to be "of no reputation" to this world, waiting on the reward that grace, patience, faith, and hard work bring versus the deceptive ways of Satan and this world. The definitive mark and goal for us should be a good name with a fervent desire to grow in holy and righteous character.