

Character And Reputation

by James Beaubelle
Forerunner,

Every Christian knows that obedience to God's moral laws and His statutes and judgments brings excellent benefits. By learning and then living within their framework, we each receive a rich reward in developing godly character. After we choose to follow God, He begins forming each of us into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. Psalm 19:7 states this principle in just a few words: "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul."

What we find when we turn aside from evil, make choices about how to follow God, and experience cleaving to God in times of trouble and suffering is that our lives and character become enriched far beyond what we could ever do on our own. God has personally called each of us, and He is teaching us day by day how to build our lives on the Rock and not the shifting sands of the culture surrounding us (see Matthew 7:24-27). Because of His calling, He has bestowed a great responsibility on us. He has placed His name on us and welcomed us into His Family, so it is now incumbent on us to walk worthy of that name. We fulfill this responsibility best when we are obedient and strive to reflect His character and His way of living within every activity of our lives.

Consider God Himself. He is the true and everlasting God. He is the Most High, and nothing else comes close to Him in beauty, power, righteousness, and holiness. He is our Father, Provider, Healer, and Teacher. All these names and titles and so many more reflect directly on who He is, instructing us about His holy character. They reveal to us His divine nature, and by them we learn, not only to know Him, but to love Him and desire to be like Him.

None of us are born full of these godly attributes—far from it! With few exceptions, godly character must be acquired over a lifetime of learning and experience. Our transformation from the Old Man to the New is a work God does mostly with us, not to us (see Philippians 2:12-13).

Though it is true that God will set up conditions and trials for us to grow and be tested in, it is equally true that we have a part to play in them. Because we make choices, we can either choose to follow His lead or not. Our efforts, then, can become part of God's creative efforts with us. When we move beyond a mere intellectual consent to His actions and begin to practice what we know to be true, we become more like Him. And this we should do.

How often have we ignored doing the thing we know we should have done? We saw what was required of us, yet because of distractions, laziness, or any number of excuses, we ignored God, at least for a while. Like Jonah, we put off until tomorrow what we truly should have done immediately.

I have utilized this spiritual procrastination, and in my judgment, it is a character flaw. God knows that we will employ this delaying tactic from time to time, as our old nature wants to resist change. Changing a heart from stone to flesh (Ezekiel 36:26) is no small task. We return quickly to old, bad habits, and if we wander into an environment of sin, like a contagious disease, it is easy to contract it. Sin, of course, is directly opposed to the creation of godly character.

But good habits that lead to virtuous behavior are also contagious. Paul instructs us in Hebrews 10:25 not to forsake the assembling of ourselves but to participate with and encourage one another. In I Corinthians 15:33, he shows us the weight of our choices in this matter: "Do not be deceived, evil company corrupts good habits," and to get us moving, he says in verse 34, "Awake to righteousness, and do not sin."

Godly Character

In these three verses, we can see that God has given each of us a good deal of control over our conduct. He has also given us a responsibility to choose right actions that lead, not only to the building of godly character and a name for ourselves that reflects on His good name, but also a name that reflects on each other as well. It must be this way if we are of one body (Ephesians 4:4; I Corinthians 12:12-13). What I do and what you do matters. It matters very much.

When we consider and speak of someone having a good name, what we are saying is they have a good reputation, usually due to having good character. We often use the words “character” and “reputation” somewhat interchangeably, but they are not the same.

Our character, be it good or bad, is who we are in God’s estimation. Because He knows us, it is an accurate picture of us. Our character is within our own keeping, and it is up to each of us to maintain it and work with God to grow more Christ-like.

The difficulty in this is in the aforementioned necessity for us to change. Human nature does not like change, at least not the kind of change that God has in mind. But change we must! Consider it this way: Were we not all spiritually dead when God called us, and now we have been made alive (Ephesians 2:1-5)? To refuse to change, then, would be tantamount to spiritual suicide! Bending our will toward God is essential to His creative process and our future. Failing to bend His way, to be stiff-necked, will never work out well for us.

Some changes God requires of us can indeed be substantial. He exposes in us bad behaviors—such as gluttony, drunkenness, dishonesty, theft—and we immediately start to cast off these unwanted traits and endeavor to be more temperate and honest. They take a great deal of effort to overcome.

But many of the changes we make are accomplished in the small matters we decide every day. Day by day, we begin to learn a little better the virtue of patience or charity. We more easily come to forgive offenses against us, and we learn to stay silent and control our tongue and anger. Many more such things we practice daily as we grow to reflect God’s image.

These changes—big and small—grow slowly over time into the fabric of our character, and in this sense, it is what we mean when we talk about the process of conversion or the perfecting of the saints. Growth in these character traits is not all of what conversion is, but it is a significant part of it.

Our Reputation

On the other hand, reputation is what other people think of us; it is their estimation of our character. Though we may try to help them form a reasonable opinion of us, we have only marginal control over it. In reality, we likely have more control over another's reputation than our own.

Jesus faced this issue when He was called gluttonous and a winebibber (Luke 7:34). The Pharisees charged Him with consorting with publicans and sinners (Matthew 9:11). They judged His outward appearance and attributed to Him a false reputation. Out of jealousy, hypocrisy, and hatred, they felt compelled to attack His reputation.

What people say about others matters. It matters to God, and it certainly matters to those whose reputations have been tarnished. Thus, the Bible frequently admonishes us to avoid gossip and idle talk about one another. We can never destroy another person's standing before God, but we can easily injure someone's standing before other men and women. In this sense, we truly are our brother's keeper (Genesis 4:9).

Most often, we want to attribute a decent reputation to the people we meet. I find that others think more highly of me than I know to be true. It is not that I am trying to deceive them but that they are not with me all the time. They do not see me and my behavior enough to know the whole story.

Such is never the case with God. He sees us better than we see ourselves. He knows our hearts, yet He never stops working on our behalf. For this, we should all be very grateful.

Character According to the Standard

It is time we define the word *character*. *Webster's Dictionary* explains it as:

1. a distinctive mark;
2. a distinctive trait or quality;
3. a person's pattern of behavior;
4. a description of the qualities of a personality;

5. a moral strength.

These are broad definitions that can define the nature of both good or bad character. But to know which traits are bad and which are good, there must be a standard to judge them by, and we must know that standard.

Thankfully, God reveals that standard to us, first and foremost, within our relationship with Him and His Son. His giving of the Holy Spirit transforms the way we think, allowing us to see what we otherwise would not. His Word reveals the truth, but just as important, we gain a desire to practice what we are learning and to conform to His image and His name. As we learn God's laws and standards and begin to accept them as our own, His way of life grows within us.

After a time, we can look back at our Old Man and wonder how we ever thought so highly of ourselves. We desire to please God and act acceptably before Him. To put this another way, the love of God has taken root in our hearts (see Romans 5:5). These changes in us are gifts from God, and if we follow through on them, godly character begins and continues to grow within us. We can add to these gifts the many examples of righteous men and women He has placed in His written Word for our benefit. These people knew God and strove mightily to live according to His will in faith, hope, and love.

God's Glorious Character

Exodus 33 and 34 contain God's revelation of His character to Moses. Moses greatly desired to see God's glory, the divine nature of God: "And [Moses] said, 'Please show me Your glory.' Then He said, 'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you'" (Exodus 33:18-19). Moses wanted to know firsthand the glory of the God he had come to worship, and God replied that His glory is in His goodness, specifically as revealed in His names. His names describe His holy and righteous nature, His perfect character.

Then the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him

and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and fourth generation.” So Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. (Exodus 34:5-8)

God’s many names revealed to Moses the glory, the nature, and the character of God. Jesus’ prayer in John 17:6 echoes this sentiment when He says He had revealed the Father to His disciples: “I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world.” Since He has also revealed the Father and His character to us through Scripture, we should consider how we live. Perhaps first, it should help us determine our approach and attitude when we come before Him in prayer or assembly.

When we speak to God, we should never forget that we are more than figuratively on holy ground before a holy God. We have been invited into His very presence. Nothing in us comes close to His matchless character and glory, so we should always speak to Him with reverence. If Jesus, our Example, always spoke with the utmost respect to His Father, how much more should the sons and daughters of this age do so in prayer to the living God? This approach will aid us greatly as our characters develop in concert with our holy God.

“Be Holy”

King Solomon writes in Proverbs 22:1, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, loving favor rather than silver and gold.” Many in this world would disagree with God on this point. They would happily trade their names, reputations, and characters for a life of comfortable living. This, however, is a darkened perspective disseminated by a corrupt culture. The converted know that wealth can go no further than the grave, but their characters and good names pass through that barrier.

Wealth is physical, while character is spiritual. Which is more important to us? More importantly, which is more important to God? Whose character traits do we want to carry through the grave—our neighbors’ or our God’s?

Jesus gives us the obvious answer in Mathew 5:48, “Therefore you shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

The apostle Peter writes in I Peter 1:14-16:

. . . as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy for I am holy.”

Peter’s instruction has everything to do with God establishing His image in us, implanting within each of His children the riches of His holy character. It is God who orders life; His purpose for us stands in the face of all the adversity we may encounter. We must work to serve that purpose and avoid frustrating any of God’s efforts. Servants like us have many duties, first to learn and then do, but our very first duty is to listen to our God. From Him flows wisdom, grace, and all the virtues we need to succeed in transforming into the image of Jesus Christ.

Of all that we need to do in preparing for the Kingdom of God, getting ourselves in alignment with God’s character is most important. By ourselves, we do very little, but by faithfully following Christ, we will grow into His image. Yes, it can be difficult for us to change. But when we find we want to put off doing what we know we should do, we must cling to God, and He will lead us in the right direction. On that day when He calls His people to Him (Matthew 24:31), He will find us because we are like Him and He knows us (I John 3:2; II Timothy 2:19).