

## Introduction to Character

Main Points: Much of life's fruit, or results, comes from good character, and character comes from spiritual growth in the ways that God has ordained. So, to make life work, focus on character growth first, not just results.

### Step One: Admit that I need to grow in order for life to work better.

Most people set out to succeed in life in two main areas: relationships, and work (or goals). Usually, what they do is just launch into those arenas on autopilot. They commit themselves to work or relationships, expend effort, and try hard. Sometimes, in the work arena, they might even get a lot of training or schooling for their chosen field. But, however they prepare, they usually jump in and go for it, hoping to make it all work.

And therein, from both research and the Bible's perspective, is the problem. No matter how hard we try to make life work, no matter how much effort we put into it, we will *always hit the ceiling that our character makeup dictates*. We can be brilliant, for example, but if we lack perseverance and courage, then we will never build a business or a career. We can be talented, but if we are not trustworthy, people will not invest with us, promote us, or want to be married to us, at least for long. We might have the best business idea in the world, or find the best mate in the world, but if we cannot confront problems and issues when they arise, our businesses and marriages will fail.

And, in the bigger picture, if we never realize that we are not God and it doesn't all revolve around us, we never find the meaning in life we are looking for. We never learn to give ourselves to things bigger than ourselves, and become transcendent people. Transcendent people are the ones who serve things larger than themselves, and learn to give themselves to higher purposes. That may be God, their values, family, their organization, their mission, humanity, or a number of "larger" causes than themselves. In losing ourselves to things bigger, through humility, we become greater.

So, the problem is that we can try to make life and a career work, but without ever paying attention to the very thing that is going to make it work: **our own character growth**. *Who we are dictates what we will be able to accomplish, and to try to accomplish anything without focusing on becoming the best person we can be will be futile in the end*. We will always be propelled, or limited by our character strengths and/or weaknesses. The Bible puts it this way:

Matt. 7:18 A good **tree** cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad **tree** cannot bear good fruit.

The tree is our character, and the fruit is the result of whatever we are trying to do. If our character is whole and solid, i.e. good, then we will produce good fruit. If someone is loving, for example, they will produce a loving marriage. If they are good to others, they will produce loyal customers and employees. A good, loving, person cannot be any other way over time. While everyone has their moments, the overall "wake" of the person's life will produce a certain kind of fruit.

Likewise, if the tree, someone's character, is selfish, the fruit left behind will be a lot of people who feel used and probably not a lot of love built. The tree always dictates the fruit.

The human temptation is therefore to just "go be loving." But, if someone is not a loving person, we have all seen that fail. The couple who always argues make a new promise to be kind to one another, and they do so, for about a day. Then, when one of them does something the other does not like, the old patterns emerge. They are back to their old tricks. Why? Because they did not work on the tree, their character, and the tree will always produce its fruit.

It is like the person who says they are going to reach certain goals, and be self-disciplined where they never have been. So, they make New Year's resolutions. But, after a few weeks, they are back to their old ways. The reason? *They focused on the result instead of focusing on changing their character makeup, becoming a new person from the inside out.*

Another example of the way the Bible puts this is in Proverbs:

Prov. 4:23 Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it *are* the issues of life.

In other words, the problems or issues that we find ourselves encountering every day come out of who we are. The NIV calls it the "wellspring" of life. The Hebrew there means "outgoings." Indeed, we are the author of a lot of the problems, or successes that we find ourselves in. The takeaway:

If we want to make our careers work, focus on our character strengths and weaknesses as much as we do our skills or knowledge base. For example, if we are not disciplined, or if we are impulsive, or easily discouraged, or afraid of failure, we must work on those issues first before we can ever succeed.

If we want to make our relationships work, focus on our character makeup as much as we focus on the relationship. If we are selfish, or full of bitterness, or controlling, for example, we have to face those issues before things are going to work.

**Possible Illustration Insert Here** (example of someone who could not get it right until they grew. Public figure, friend, or self, who always had a failure pattern until character growth. Or, insert an example of someone who could always be trusted because of their character and always performed well because of who they were as a person.)

### **Definition of Character Integrity:**

As we can see, the ability to make life work requires much more than just honesty and ethics as a definition of character. It requires wholeness and maturity. When we possess that, then we can deal with life and be fruitful. That is why the definition of

character for this series is broader than just ethical character. The definition we will use is like the Bible's view, that mature character is able to deal with life and be fruitful in every area. Our definition for this series is this:

**Character = the ability to meet the demands of reality**

Life has a lot of realities: relational, market pressures, internal realities, problems and obstacles, moral realities and others. The mature character is able to meet the demands of those realities and be fruitful in the midst of them. As Psalm 1 says:

Psa. 1:3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

And a person's character is known by the fruit that he or she leaves behind. That is what is referred to in the book as "the wake." Just as a boat leaves a wake behind, we leave a wake behind us as we go through people's lives, or through a company or an organization. The two sides of the wake are the task/mission, and the relationships. In other words,

1. Did I accomplish the goals or the mission?
2. Were the people better off as a result of knowing me?

**Step Two: I need wisdom and input in order to grow my character.**

It has been said that to continue to do the same thing expecting different results is the definition of insanity. Translated, if we just continue doing what we already are doing in our marriages, relationships, or work, or in overcoming habits, we will be limited to what we have already tried. We will just do the same thing over and over again. So, to grow in our character, we need input from the outside. We need wisdom and knowledge. Here is what the Bible says:

Prov. 4:10 Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many.

Prov. 4:11 I guide you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths.

Prov. 4:12 When you walk, your steps will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble.

Prov. 19:8 He who gets wisdom loves his own soul; he who cherishes understanding prospers.

In order for us to work on the "tree," our character, we have to find out what the issues are that we need to work on. We need to know more and understand more. As we do, we will know more of what and how to change. So, we have to be open to what we need to learn, and ask ourselves where we are going to go to get the input we need. We have to seek wisdom.

**Possible Illustration Insert Here** (example of someone who never could get it right until they finally learned something new....Person with new computer calls tech support and the tech person asks the customer it is plugged in. The person plugs it in and all of a sudden lights begin to go on. Or, use a real life, deeper example.)

### **Step Three: I need experience to grow my character.**

We are a collection of our experiences. If we have a rigid, protective character, for example, there have been experiences that have made us that guarded. If we are afraid to open up and trust others, there have been experiences that have made us like that. If we are afraid to take risks and afraid to fail, there have been experiences that have made us like that.

On the other hand, we have had other experiences that have caused us to grow as well. You might remember being afraid of competition and then a coach took you under his arm in school and encouraged you. That experience gave you the courage it took to begin to take risks, and you grew in your athletic talent. But it came from a character shift as a result of a new experience.

You may have found yourself afraid of failure and afraid to call on customers who would reject you, but you had a sales manager who supported you even when you failed, and helped you not take failure so seriously. As a result of that experience of working for her, you now make so many cold calls that you win every sales award possible. The experience changed you.

You might have been abused, or unloved, and were afraid of relationship with people. Yet you found a small group that gave you a new experience and that experience overcame the fearful character that you once had.

Interestingly, the English word character means “engraved mark.” Our experiences engrave things upon us that become a part of who we are. The Bible echoes this idea. The word that is sometimes translated “character” in the New Testament is a word that is also translated “experience.” For example, in Romans chapter 5, in the NIV, it says this:

Rom. 5:3 Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance;

Rom. 5:4 perseverance, **character**; and **character**, hope.

Instead of “character,” the KJV uses the word “experience.” When we go through experiences, such as trials and suffering, it changes us. We are formed through experience, and how we choose to deal with it.

So, we can’t just sit in a study or a library and study character, or love, or success, and expect to grow. We have to “get out of the boat,” and gain experiences in the areas of character in which we desire growth. If we want to become more loving, we have to join a group and experience relationship at a deeper level and learn to become more intimate. If we want to grow in our work character, we have to take some risks and try some new things, and probably find some mentors who can help us. But the point is that you will not change by not using that part of yourself and gaining new experiences. You can’t read a book on golf and know how to play.

**Possible Illustration Insert Here** (example of how new experience changed someone and helped them grow and become a different character in an important area of life)

#### **Step Four: I need God, His Word, and others to grow in my character.**

To change character requires our getting things from outside ourselves. We have already seen what some of those are: power, wisdom, strength, support, experiences, love, coaching, and other things that we don't have. Where are we going to get them? Basically, the Bible tells us that we get them from a few places.

##### A. God

God provides all of those things as we plug into His infinite wisdom, strength, support, guidance, and love:

Prov. 2:6 For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Psa. 29:11 The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.

2Th. 3:3 But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

Prov. 3:5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

Prov. 3:6 in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

Psa. 25:4 Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths;

Psa. 25:5 guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.

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Psa. 143:10 Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.

**Possible Illustration Insert Here** (someone who made changes by connecting with God)

##### B. God's Word

We get a wisdom, strength, comfort, and other things that we need from God's Word:

Psa. 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Psa. 119:129 Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them.

Psa. 119:130 The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

Deut. 6:24 The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today.

Deut. 6:25 And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.”

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Psa. 119:24 Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors.

Psa. 119:28 My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.

Psa. 119:52 I remember your ancient laws, O LORD, and I find comfort in them.

Psa. 119:76 May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant.

Psa. 119:77 Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight.

**Possible Illustration Insert Here** (an example of God’s Word changing someone)

### C. People

God has given us people to be in our lives to give us the things that we do not possess. From them we get correction, strength, discipline, support, love, modeling, and a lot of things that we need to grow into the people we need to become:

1Pet. 4:10 Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.

Eph. 4:16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

1Th. 5:14 And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

Rom. 12:10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.

Rom. 15:14 ¶ I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.

1Th. 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Heb. 10:24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

Prov. 25:12 Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear.

**Possible Illustration Insert Here** (an example of someone's life changed by the power of community or other people)

### **Conclusion and Action Steps**

Life will not work until we have the character to make it work, and we can only get that through spiritual growth doing it God's way. Therefore, we have to commit to the process of growth instead of only committing to the desired result. That means we have to join the structures that will help us do that, like a small group, mentor, accountability relationship, etc. and get on the path of character change.