

Character Counts. Really Counts!

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Africa Nazarene University

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II Peter 1:3-10 II Peter 3:11-12 Ephesians 4:2

Introduction

Character Counts! Really Counts!

A great Christian leader of the last century wrote, “If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself.” Character is different from reputation. One writer distinguished the difference this way:

Reputation is what you are supposed to be;
character is what you are....
Reputation is what you have when you come to a new community;
character is what you have when you go away.
Your reputation is made in a moment;
your character is built in a lifetime....
Reputation makes you rich or makes you poor;
character makes you happy or makes you miserable....
Reputation is what men say about you on your tombstone;
character is what the angels say about you before the throne of God.

In this commencement address to the Africa Nazarene University graduating class of 2009, I challenge each of you to make a covenant with God—a covenant to be passionate about Christian character formation and development for the rest of your life!

Character counts! Really counts!

Character is who we are when no one else is around.
Character is who we are in the pressure times of our lives.
Character springs from the core values by which we build our lives.
Character provides the moral compass by which we live our lives.
Character captures what it is we most want our children to inherit from us.
Character is always the wellspring and foundation of our outward actions.

In his second epistle (II Peter 1:3-12), Peter asks the character question, “What sort of people ought we to be?” He is quick to give his answer: “Men and women of good and godly character.” Peter knew that God is more interested in our character than He is in our comfort, our accomplishments, our reputation.

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In the scriptural passage read to you, Peter makes three assertions regarding Christian character.

- I. Character qualities must be intensely pursued.
- II. Character formation is a life-changing process.
- III. Character development has a profound purpose.

Permit me to speak briefly to these character-building imperatives.

I. Character qualities must be intensely pursued.

Often I ponder this question: Do people around us see in us the character qualities identified by Peter? I'm afraid they may see or hear just the opposite, like a cynical tongue, a negative attitude, a judgmental spirit, or a condescending demeanor.

These negative attitudes and behaviors, if we do not guard our thoughts and spirit, will eat us alive. Perhaps we, even on our campus, have not escaped the temptation to cynicism, negativism, and condescension. God forgive us!

The Bible identifies for us very different character qualities to be intensely pursued, if we are to become men and women of good and godly character.

Peter mentions in chapter 1: 5-7 the qualities of goodness, knowledge (or discernment), self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.

Paul's list in Ephesians 4:2 includes humility, gentleness, patience, and kindness.

The Old Testament prophet Micah asked, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

A friend said to me several years ago, "Life is too short not to live together kindly, compassionately and forgivingly." I was immediately reminded of the last verse of Ephesians, "Be kind and compassionately to one another, forgiving one another, just as in Christ God forgave you."

As Christians, we want these character qualities to characterize us at our best and convict us at our worst. From God's perspective, Christian character qualities are absolutely essential, and must be intensely pursued.

II. Peter doesn't just identify essential character qualities; secondly, he insists that character formation is a life-changing process.

In other words, the character qualities identified by Peter flow from a life that has been saved by God's grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ, who calls us to a life of holy living. Yet these very qualities of the holy life must be nurtured, cultivated, and developed throughout our lives if we truly are to be Christlike.

Christian character formation takes place over a lifetime, and is shaped through our response to scriptural imperatives, and through a process of brokenness, prayer, silence, and confession.

I have discovered a painful yet fascinating relationship between brokenness and character development. I must continually ask the question in the conflict situations of life: what is God needing to teach me through this situation, this circumstance, or through this encounter...where I work, where I live, or even where I study?

The issue isn't who is right or wrong. The issue is my response to and attitude toward the person, situation, circumstance, or encounter--not why and what if; but, what can I learn, and how can I change.

James 1:2-4 challenges us to consider it pure joy...whenever we face trials of many kinds because we know that the testing of our faith develops perseverance. "Perseverance," James states, "must finish its work so that we may be mature and complete, lacking nothing."

In Psalms 66:10-12, David prays, "For you, O God, have tested us. You refined us as silver is refined. You laid affliction upon our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads. We went through fire and water, but you brought us out to rich fulfillment." God's process of helping us develop character involves being broken by Him. According to Psalm 51, "broken and contrite spirits are sacrifices we bring to God."

We can respond to the brokenness in our lives in one of several ways:

We can resent the situation, person, circumstance, or God...and thus grow bitter, become angry, and withdraw. But a transforming response to brokenness drives us to our knees. In these moments, we ask God in prayer what He is wanting to teach us through this "dark night of the soul."

What really hurts is that God often uses people who are different from us—teachers, employers, family, or students - often people with whom we may have problems, to teach us these lessons we need to know about ourselves. As strong as we think we are, we recognize how weak we really are, and how much we need our heavenly Father if we are grow in holiness of life. And, again, we are driven to our knees.

The process of Christian character formation begins with brokenness, which leads to prayer, and then we listen in silence. Psalms 39:1, states, "I will keep a muzzle on my mouth...I will...not let my tongue lead me into sin." Henri Nouwen, in commenting on this verse makes a profound statement, "When the door of the steam bath is continually left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it." [REPEAT]

How often we open our mouths and speak about events of the world, or about people, or circumstances; and how seldom we close our mouths and listen to God. a) It is when we are on our knees, during the times of brokenness, honesty, and confession, that our dependence on Him is strongest.

And in these moments we cry out in confession how really weak we are in our own strength.

Remember the chorus:

His strength is perfect when our strength is gone, He'll carry us when we can't carry on;
Raised in His power, the weak become strong; His strength is perfect, His strength is perfect.

When I speak of brokenness, prayer, silence, and confession as means through which God shapes and forms our character, I am reminded of the chorus that has these thoughts:

Little by little You're changing me. Line upon line, You're changing me. In every way
You're changing me. Father, You're changing me. [Praise God!]

Remember, Christian character formation is a life-changing and lifelong process, nurtured primarily by the spiritual disciplines of confession, silence, prayer, the trials and testings of our faith, and made effective in our lives by His grace and His strength alone!

Grace alone, which God supplies, Strength alone, He will provide, Christ in us, our Cornerstone; we will go forth in grace alone.

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III. Finally, Peter drives home the point that character development has a profound purpose.

The book *Becoming a Person of Influence* states that “many succeed momentarily by what they know, some succeed temporarily by what they do, but few succeed permanently by who they are.” “Leading Christianly really is about who you are, not what you do.”

Nevertheless, being a man or woman of “good and godly character” produces profound results. Verse 8 tells us that if we have these character qualities increasingly in our lives, We will be effective in reflecting Christlikeness in our lives and productive in the ministry of reconciliation with others.

God wants to develop these Christian character qualities in our lives so that we can participate with Him in His great mission in the world. Amazingly, we participate with God in His mission of reconciliation through living godly lives before others, and faithful lives before Him. What a humbling thought!

Five questions have helped me in my ministry of reconciliation and my pursuit of Christlikeness. Perhaps they will help you.

- Will this action I am considering strengthen me spiritually?
- Would I want my son, my wife, or my best friend to copy this action of mine?
- Does this action violate a biblical principle?
- Does this action strengthen the body of Christ?
- Would an unbelieving friend be attracted to Christ and the Christian faith by my behavior?

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Remember, God is more interested in our character than He is in our accomplishments, our comfort...or our reputation. He wants to shape you and me for Kingdom priorities. He desires for us to participate with Him in reconciling the world unto Himself!

Conclusion

I ask you to consider this question as I conclude: when you come to the end of your life, now do you want to be remembered—for your character or for your reputation? Peter comes down squarely on the side of character.

He admonishes you and me to be “men and women of good and godly character,” individuals whose lives are characterized by goodness, knowledge or discernment, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love so that we will be effective and productive in the things that count for eternity.

Remember, character counts. Really counts!

May your passion and covenant for good and godly character burn deeply in the heart of every person in the NTC class of 2009. Amen.