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### **Character**

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I recently had an inquiry from one of the leaders in the home school movement wanting to know if I had written anything on character development. I told him that I had studied it but I had not written anything on the subject. After much more thought and more research I am now ready to tell him and you what I think character is all about. The Lord knows that we need character development in our society today.

The dictionary has many definitions for character, but the one we are interested in is:

"the complex of mental and ethical traits marking and often individualizing a person, group, or nation."

Now I have to say to you that this definition is in some ways vague. It does not mention good character and bad character.

In my early years in psychiatry I often encountered patients who had bad character and could be diagnosed as psychopaths. These were later called character disorders. This appellation usually meant that the person had a disorder of character that led him to commit acts that were not compatible with what was considered right behavior. Thus any antisocial or dissocial behavior was considered psychopathic.

The Bible was the determinant of what was considered right and wrong behavior in the Western World at that time. The principles of right and wrong behavior were incorporated into the laws of the lands and the state enforced what was legislated as right behavior by imposing sanctions on the persons who deviated. It is not surprising that any activities that were committed against a person or his

property were considered wrong. The person who committed them was denominated a psychopath.

Because murder and incest are universal taboos it is not surprising that in almost every society they carry severe sanctions. Other crimes against the person such as attempted murder, manslaughter, assault and kidnapping are sanctioned, but less severely. Even so, robbery, embezzlement, fraud, horse thievery (in the past), auto theft, arson, and most other property crimes are sanctioned too. If you have carefully read the Ten Commandments and the Levitical laws you will understand what role the Bible played in the development of our legal system. Not only did it address property and personal crimes but it also regulated sexual behavior with laws that prohibited deviant behavior. Sexual crimes were such things as rape, pedophilia, and in my youth even cohabiting with prostitutes was considered criminal behavior.

How does character develop? For thousands of years it has been the parents' and the church's obligation to teach right behavior, or what Paul called in 2 Timothy 3:14-16, right living.

God revealed in the Old Testament his rules for right living. They were called commandments and all people were advised to live by them. They were not, however, obligatory. God knew that since he had given us free will he had to appeal to our will to get us to obey.

God appealed to his people to choose his laws. "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed" (Deuteronomy 30:11-18).

It is a truism that God's laws had value. If they were obeyed they made, and even today make a favorable difference in the lives of the people. If they chose not to obey them they had to suffer the consequences of their behavior.

The consequences for disobedience were rather severe and the penalties for disobedience were painful (Deuteronomy 28). Now it is a fact that God decreed penalties on the disobedient person, tribe or nation. Thus the obedient and the disobedient suffered, although Abraham got God to say that he would not impose penalties on Sodom and Gomorrah even if ten righteous men were found in the city.

I am sure that when He decided to destroy it most of the people were disobedient, and those who were not approved of the behavior of those who were disobedient. Paul made it plain that to encourage the wrong behavior of others is as bad as being unrighteous (Romans 1:32).

All through the Bible it speaks of righteousness. It is clear that righteousness is equated with good character. There are 212 references to righteousness in the Bible, so the subject was very important to God or else it would not have been mentioned so often.

From the very beginning God was portrayed as righteous. Men who aspired to righteousness had to be godly, i.e. they had to refrain from sinning. In this way they could attain righteousness. But this was impossible for men to always obey God's commandments so God made it possible for them to attain righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ. This was possible since the Holy Spirit came and dwelt in them to give them power to obey God's commandments. "This righteousness is given through faith in [Or through the faithfulness of] Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile" (Romans 3:22).

Paul made it plain that one could not obey the commandments of God without the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:7). Therefore, to have good character was to be

obedient to God's commandments and ordinances and to have attained the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

The acts that constitute disobedience are called sin. Sin never affects only the person who commits it. Others will always be harmed directly or indirectly. Since adultery is one of the most common sins committed in our society today let's use it as an example.

First, it is a betrayal of the adulterer's wife or husband. This causes hurt, which is a combination of the emotions of sorrow and anger. It also causes a loss of trust, for all persons in a marriage expect their partners to be faithful. Remember that in the marriage ceremony we promise to forsake all others.

It also elicits a very painful emotion called jealousy in the person who has been betrayed. Finally, in 75% of the marriages it leads to divorce. With divorce children are hurt and will develop either character flaws because of the example set for them or a variety of personality or psychiatric problems.

From this example I think you can understand why God, who loves his children, hates divorce. Adultery is always the result of a disorder of character, for those who stray are committing an ethically wrong act.

There is no question that one can have what appears to be good character even though they do not have the righteousness that comes by faith. I have known many people who had good character who were not spiritual. They were religious! They knew about God, but did not know him. They worked hard to obey the commandments they had been taught, and did so to the best of their ability.

I am certain that God instructed the Israelites to teach their children his laws at all times so that they were fixed in their minds. They would then be more likely to behave according to those laws. They did so automatically. God knew this when

he said, “ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). When thoroughly indoctrinated, they generally tried to live righteous lives.

Julian Marias said that we live in the present through the past in anticipation of the future. Thus, our past, if filled with the truth of God, is going to have a profound effect on our behavior in the present and future. God knew this and I am sure that is why he ordered the Israelites to teach their children his laws. In the process he also knew they were also reinforcing their own knowledge of those laws.

What, then, does the foregoing have to do with character? The Bible is very explicit about trusting in God’s commandments. David summed it all up in Psalm 9:10 when he said, “Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.” We can say then that God is trustworthy. I have heard it said that God is absolutely trustworthy. He is the only one who is. God’s righteousness which is available to us will make us want to be trustworthy.

God demanded that the Israelites be loyal to him (Exodus 20:3). He commanded them not to worship any other Gods. Even so, they found that Jehovah’s code of ethics did not allow them to exercise their human nature and were onerous to them, so they began to worship other gods that were not gods at all.

Now it is a fact that man’s sex drive and his greed are powerful, and as a result mankind does what their human nature impels them to do. Therefore, they create gods whose worship allows them sexual excesses or they make money a god.

In biblical times the people of the Near East, other than the Hebrews, had generally created fertility gods. Sexual exercises were part of their worship. Temple prostitutes both male and female were often the priests and priestesses. In our day money is the most common alternate god. Satan appealed to their human nature to get them to worship these false gods. He is still doing so today.

Friendliness is another dimension of character. God created us with a radical need for friends. He did this because we need each other to ward off enemies and to help us deal with the dangerous world that we live in.

In the same way, we need each other to obtain our food and to provide protection from the elements. The recent tragedy of hurricane Katrina revealed how much people need help after the destruction of their communities. The most effective helpers after the storm, and even today, are Christian groups who are cleaning up and restoring with no expectation of remuneration.

Having friends also helps us overcome loneliness. Man cannot live alone. He was created to live in relationships. He needs God, a mate, children and friends. He or she is to be willing to establish those relationships to satisfy those needs.

As I have written before, the basis of all relationships is love. Love is an emotion that attracts us to one another. When we are attracted we come alongside the other person and desire to get to know them. As we get to know them we make them psychospiritually part of ourselves.

This is called installation. Our willingness to interact with a person is called friendliness. I have always tried to be friendly, but have tried harder since I became a Christian.

My mentor told me that a way to get a person involved in conversation so I could get to know them was to ask them to tell me about themselves, their family or their work. Only on rare occasions has this failed to develop a friendly relationship with the person I have approached.

There are some people who are unfriendly. I was once flying back to the US from South Africa. The seat next to me was empty from Johannesburg to Capetown. In Capetown a man got on and took the empty seat. After he had settled in I asked him if he was a South African. He said he was. My next question was to ask him why he was going to the states. He angrily told me it was none of my damn business. He did not say another word for the next 14 hours. He didn't even thank the stewardess for the things she did for him and did not respond to her overtures of friendliness.

Friendliness is important in church life. I once did an experiment in which I went to ten churches of different denominations that I had never attended in our community, and where no one knew me. I did all the things that a visitor was asked to do. If it was to put a card in my pocket that said I was a visitor, or put a flower or ribbon in my lapel, I did what they asked me to do. After the service I went to the vestibule of the church and stood there as the folks filed out. I then went and shook hands with the minister and departed. It was interesting that in only one church did anyone welcome me or invite me back. Only two ministers said anything to me about being welcome or inviting me back. On at least two occasions I was passed on with a gentle shove of my hand so they could get to the next person who I felt seemed more important to them. Jesus ordered us to

be friendly when he asked us to take strangers in our home (Matthew 25:43).

Friendliness is a distinct aspect of character.

Another good character trait is to be courteous. Manners are habitual conducts in relating. I am from the south and grew up being taught good manners.

My mother and father were sticklers for addressing adults and superiors with "Yes Sir" and "Yes Maam" or "No Sir" and "No Maam." We were not allowed to say yeah or no when answering them.

We were expected to have good table manners. One did not talk with his mouth full, he kept his left hand in his lap and did not put his elbows on the table.

In all of our relationships we were to be mannerly. We men were to be especially mannerly with women. We were to hold the door open and let them go before us when entering a building. We were to open a car door for them and help get them in before we entered. We were always to walk with women on the side away from the curb on the sidewalk. We were to help old persons across the street. We also were not to talk in a loud voice to gain attention. Good manners are a sign of respect for others. Jesus emphasized this when he told us to be the servant of others (Matthew 23:11).

Things have changed in the world of manners. I once held the door open for a coed to go in the library at Duke, and her comment as she went by was, "Chauvinist!!!" I have to admit that I tend to not do the things I used to do that I considered mannerly in the past because of feminist propaganda and their rejection of good manners by men.

Kindness is another trait of good character. The golden rule is a good measure of kindness, for in it is found the admonition to treat others as you would want to be

treated yourself. None of us want to be hurt or traumatized either physically or emotionally for no reason.

Kindness also gives rise to benevolence, the giving of our means to others in need. This may be monetary or it may be in services. One often observes this when a person shovels the snow off the walks of a person in the neighborhood, rakes their leaves or cleans the house of those who are unable to do so themselves. One of the best examples of kindness is Habitat for Humanity. Many persons also help families with baby sitting in emergencies as an act of kindness. At other times they may bring food when the persons are not able to cook themselves. Any act that helps another person in need can be an act of kindness.

God urged us to be obedient to his laws. Jesus said that if we loved him we would obey his teachings. Indeed obedience was one of his most important attributes. Jesus was obedient to God (His Father) and wanted us to be obedient to his commandments. They were only a few in number.

He wanted us to love God, to love our neighbor, ourselves, our fellow Christians and to show our love by feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and prisoners and taking strangers in our homes. Obedience was manifested in his life when he said that it was not his will that he should be crucified, but it was God's will, and he submitted to that will obediently (Philippians 2:8). Our obedience has to be extended to God's laws and to the laws and rules of our nation and community.

Children have to be obedient to their parents, for they know what is best for their children and why they should do the things that the parents want them to do (Ephesians 6:1). Training in right living is the parents' obligation to their children in order that they may have happiness in their life and know how to cope with life's problems.

The child's life is likely to be governed by their human nature if the parents do not train them rightly. This is why Paul admonished children to obey their parents a second time. (Colossians 3:20).

Of course, the assumption is that the parents have nothing but beneficial direction for their children. There are unfortunately parents who do not direct their children beneficially. They not only do not discipline them, but they teach them to be evil both by example and by persuasion.

I once saw a drug addict whose father "shot him up" at age 12 so he could "enjoy" heroin. Fifteen years later he was being treated in a federal treatment center for heroin addiction.

Cheerfulness is another mark of good character. The Bible does not speak directly to the issue of cheerfulness. On two occasions in the New Testament people are urged to cheer up, but only because they are discouraged.

Even so, to be cheerful is to display happiness or joy. Since joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit it is incumbent on a Christian to display joy. Anger or anxiety are not characteristics of a person with good character for they tend to spread gloom about them causing people to have the same emotions. A friendly person is usually a loving cheerful person and draws people to him/herself.

Thriftiness is another mark of good character. John Wesley told his followers to make all they could, save all they could and give all they could. Very few people these days live according to his directives.

It is a sad fact in our society today that many people carry enormous debt on multiple credit cards and bank loans. Most of their payments go to pay high interest and they are not able to pay off their principle. They have never learned to be thrifty. I recently read that each American owes an average of about \$82,000 dollars. This is just personal debt.

Those of us who grew up in the depression learned to be thrifty and continued our thriftiness into our adult life. Not the present generation! They have fallen into the trap of the popular culture that has as its philosophy, "If you want it buy it."

To be brave is another attribute of good character. Life is filled with many threatening and dangerous events. One has to have courage to be able to deal with the threats and dangers.

Boldness should be a characteristic of a Christian for otherwise we will not witness for the Lord as he commanded us. In the same way we will not pray with boldness. It was said that we can come boldly before the throne of God to make our petitions known (Hebrews 4:16). It is interesting that after Pentecost the disciples were able to boldly proclaim the Good News in the power of the Spirit. To be bold one has to be brave.

I was told as a child that "cleanliness is next to godliness." The Bible and its commandments tell us to keep our bodies clean. Jesus told us we were to go even further. We are to keep our minds clean. He said that his teachings made us clean (John 15:3).

One of the things that William James observed happening in people who had been converted was that they felt clean inside and out. I once led a Hell's Angels prostitute to the Lord and she jumped up and said, "I'm clean, I'm clean, I'm clean." She then explained that she felt so dirty after she did a "trick" (had sex with a customer), and now that feeling of dirtiness was gone.

A person of good character must be able to honor God. They may only be a deist or a very religious person, but they usually are reverent. They realize that there is a higher power and he is due honor.

If they are born again Christians they do not have to struggle to honor him. The Holy Spirit will energize them to honor him and recognize his worthiness after having revealed truth about him that they had not perceived before. When he joins his Spirit to their spirit they will also understand the infinite dimensions of his love and will respond with reverence (Romans 8:14-16).

At the beginning of this essay I said that one has to differentiate between good and bad character. I also said that in my early years there was emphasis in the nosology of psychiatric disease of a number of character disorders. Among them were the following: alcoholism, drug addiction, homosexuality, pedophilia, voyeurism, exhibitionism and criminality.

We were especially concerned with a group of dissocial individuals who were always in trouble and were enormously disruptive to society. Many times they were the bane of their families' existence and for us as psychiatrists they were trouble. We did not know how to treat them so they became a thorn in our flesh. As a matter of fact, we could not help any of the patients with the diagnoses I listed above who were usually brought to us or occasionally came to us voluntarily.

One of the characteristics of these persons was that they could cause their loved ones all kinds of pain and could inflict all kinds of trauma on others, but they showed no remorse. They lied constantly and seemed to have no conscience.

Some of them would shed "crocodile tears" when confronted with the pain they caused, but a few minutes later were their usual pleasant self. Their entire lives revolved around fulfilling their own desires.

I will never forget a lecture given to us as medical students by a famous English psychiatrist named Partridge. His lecture was on psychopathy and as he finished he told us a story of a psychopath he had known.

The story went like this. A wealthy English banker had a son who grew up and from his early teen years was in trouble. He had trouble in school and trouble out of school. In school he cheated and plagiarized. In and out of school he drank too much and was in trouble with the law. He had many arrests for dangerous driving.

When he reached maturity his father placed him in a job in one of the branches of his bank. He had been there only a short time when it was found that he had embezzled a large sum. His father paid off his debt and sent him to another branch some distance away hoping he had learned his lesson.

It was not long before the father found that he again had embezzled a large sum. Again the father replaced the money.

He and the boy's mother went to get him and bring him home. On the way home the father had an accident in which the car was almost completely destroyed. The mother and father were hardly scratched. The son was killed. Dr. Partridge said that it was the only happy ending to the story of a psychopath that he had ever heard.

Only a few people wrote about character disorders in those days. There was, though, a psychiatrist at the University of Georgia Medical School in Augusta named Hervey Cleckley who wrote a very illuminating book on the subject. The

title was *The Mask of Sanity* (available to download for free at [www.cassiopaea.com/cassiopaea/psychopath.htm](http://www.cassiopaea.com/cassiopaea/psychopath.htm).)

In this book he said that a few psychopaths are born and most of them are made. Those that are born seem to begin their careers quite early whereas those who are made by being raised in a dysfunctional home begin later. Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck in their studies of criminal careers found that they would begin as early as three years. If they began before nine they continued their criminal activity throughout their lives. These are the ones that are born. If they began after nine they would usually cease by the time they were 35.

It seems that those who quit grew up in dysfunctional environments, but eventually learned to behave in socially acceptable ways. I found in a study that I conducted that youthful first offenders almost never persisted in their criminal behavior if their first offense was after fifteen years.

In today's world we have increasing numbers of persons who have character disorders. They gather together in gangs and fill our jails and schools. They use and sell drugs, they murder each other, they are sexually promiscuous and commit all kinds of antisocial acts. They are disobedient to their parents and are scofflaws. Most of these learn to behave this way in the homes and the culture that they are raised in. A subculture that has exemplified this best for centuries is the Mafia.

Now what do we do to rear children with good character? The first thing we must do is rear them in a home with a mother **and father** (if possible)! With the high incidence of illegitimacy that exists in our society this is difficult for a large percentage of children.

Second, the mother and father must love one another. If they do there will be order in the home and the parents will have love to pass on to their children. This love will be in the form of affirmation, i.e. they will love them unconditionally.

Third, parents must be of one mind in the training of their children. They have to do this by life and lip. This kind of discipline is called authoritative. Authoritative discipline explains to the child that they have behaved wrongly and why sanctions must be applied.

Parents should have rules that are reasonable, and children should have responsibilities. They should be taught about the problems they will face in life and how to deal with them. Parents are to have their children's best interests at heart as they teach them to live rightly. Children learn by operant and aversive conditioning so they must have rewards and punishment.

Fourth, parents will attend to their children's spiritual life by exposing them to religious teachings. They should go to a church that teaches God's Word. Even if they do the parents, too, are also obligated to teach the Word to their children.

Bible stories and Christian story books read to them by their parents can be their first exposure to religion, but as they grow older they should read the Word for themselves. It is well to guide them in their reading.

Parents must provide the opportunity for children to understand the necessity of salvation and its benefits. This is best done by having them hear the witnesses of born again Christians. They should also understand that salvation is not enough. They need to be disciplined.

Fifth, parents should encourage education as a facilitator of continued growth intellectually and morally. Home schooling has the capacity to produce children of worth who will be socially adept.

Sixth, as they grow they should be given as much freedom as they can responsibly handle. They cannot be protected from the world, but when they are disciplined properly they learn to cope with worldly temptation and either flee from it or deal with it. There is no way to avoid it.

Finally, there are many organizations that reinforce the values of the children's parents. Unfortunately the world and especially public schools teach the opposite. Three organizations that are excellent reinforcers of conventional morals are the Boy Scouts of America, Young Life and Youth for Christ.

There is some question about Girl Scouts today since they are said to permit lesbians to be leaders. Their oath and law omits any reference to moral development. It used to be quite similar to the boys, but their recent revision is more secular and feminist.

Our greatest need in our society today is to create children of worth. We can only do so if we train them to have good character.