

**“And this Gospel
shall be preached...”**
Matthew 24:14

Sermon Summaries from Ministers of the Worldwide Church of God

How To Develop Righteous Character

by Leon Walker

In nations or individuals, things like wealth, position, education, intellect, natural abilities and talents seem very important but in fact count for very, very little without character. And the interesting thing about character is that basically it is not hereditary; it is not inborn; it is something you have to develop.

When you reflect that character is the only thing that you will take with you from this life into the life that is to come, it comes to be very important. It is vital. So, how do we develop that holy, righteous character that God wants us to have? And, so we can understand that: What is character?

Rather than try to define it, I'll describe character as basically self-discipline and self-control. Don't think about anybody else controlling you, think about controlling yourself. This obviously implies choosing the right direction, then forcing yourself to go in that right direction. That's what character is all about.

Freedom to Choose

Let's look at the ingredients that are necessary to develop character. First of all, we have to have freedom of choice, to choose the way we're going to go. This means that there have to be alternatives. If you can only go one way, you can't develop character.

Let's look at an example in Genesis 2:16-17. All

the essential ingredients to develop character are there.

“And the [Eternal] God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

First, God commanded—or instructed—the man, told him what he should do. God did not force man to go a certain way, did not restrain man from going the wrong way, but the definition of right and wrong was given to him, and he was warned of the wrong way: “. . . in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” The opportunity to eat of the wrong tree was certainly there. So, man—and woman—was free to choose.

Then, as you read on in chapter 3, the serpent comes up to Eve, and she eats the forbidden fruit—and Adam eats. But what was God doing when all of that was going on?

What if you or I had been there? What would you have done? Some of us would have been like the “B.C.” comic strip character. We would have used a club, bam, bam, bam on the head of the serpent, as soon as he said the first word. Perhaps we would have grabbed Adam and Eve and shook them and not allowed them to sin. God stood back and heard everything, saw everything and did nothing to stop it. God did not stand over them with

a rod or a whip and prevent them from sinning.

From the point of view of character, Adam and Eve used no self-discipline, no self-control. Neither of them did anything to stop their desire to take of the fruit and eat it. No character was developed. As a matter of fact, they were worse off now than before because they established a pattern for themselves and their children after them of doing things their way, rather than as God told them to do.

We find here, very clearly, that the right choice would have led to right character development. But they chose to make the wrong decision and they paid the penalty for it. But I do want to stress that God did give them the freedom to make a choice. You see, God had to find out sooner or later what they were going to do.

God is not merely concerned with the actions of individuals, but with children who are to be born into His Divine Family, able to rule and lead and carry out His instructions totally and completely. We as individuals are faced with choices. We come up with situations every day in our lives in which we are confronted with an alternative or a series of alternatives. And so, we have to make choices between those things to determine whether or not in fact we will develop character in the process.

Growing Up to Freedom

Galatians 4:1-2: "Now I say, That the heir [one who is to inherit the father's position and wealth], as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant [the word in the Greek actually means a slave], though he be lord of all"—potentially master of everything when he grows up. Like a slave, he "is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father."

How many of us have complained as a young person in the family: "I'm treated just like a slave around here. I don't have any freedoms whatsoever." You know, it's true. Because a child obviously is not mature enough to have the freedom to do what he pleases. A three- or four-year-old child must be told what time to go to bed, perhaps even put to bed; told what time to get up, be given a balanced diet instead of the ice cream and candy he would choose if he had total freedom.

But when the child matures, through education, discipline, training and what have you, that child learns to make the right choices and right decisions

in his life. He then is given more freedom, and, obviously, responsibility goes with that freedom.

So you and I are faced with choices constantly in which we have to look at the situation before us and determine what we are going to do. Will we yield to the pressure of our friends, of society, of our own human nature? We are free. No one's going to stop us unless what we are doing is illegal or hurts others. But it is up to us whether we build character or not—or if perhaps we tear down even what our parents helped us build.

God Never Forces Anyone to His Way

We read in Romans 1:19-23: "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them [the human race]; for God hath shewed it unto them." Now God has not shown all of His spiritual truth to man, but He has shown him many things, even certain basic laws of morality. Every society has knowledge of that.

"For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God [at one time they did], they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations [reasonings], and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things."

They made the choice: "I don't want God in my life, I will not express my gratitude and appreciation to Him, I will not humble myself before God, I want nothing to do with Him. I reject Him in my life." So God said, "Okay, if you want to do that, go ahead." Then God "gave them up to uncleanness," allowed them to go that way of following their own desires.

We find here a principle of God: God does not compel man to follow His ways. He teaches. He shows. He commands. But He certainly does not compel one nor force one to go that way.

But we do find bad results of mankind's wrong choice in our world today: sexual uncleanness, even homosexuality, lesbianism and so on, as we find in verses 26-27: "For this cause God gave them up

unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men . . .”

Instead of building character, mankind can make for itself a curse (verses 29-31): “Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, Without understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful . . .”

Yes, you’re free. But with that freedom, you have responsibility. Jesus was free, in the temptation on the mount, recorded in Matthew 4. He was faced with a choice: The easy way that Satan was offering or the hard way. So he exercised self-control, self-discipline.

That’s the example to look to when we are confronted with temptations. We are free, but we also should be as Christ—determined, absolutely convicted, and strong enough to make the right decision and follow right things.

Peer Pressure

Now this leads to another aspect: Character development implies you accept the responsibility for your decision. Let’s go back to Genesis 3:12, with the case of Adam and Eve. God faced the man first of all, and the man said, “The *woman* whom *thou* gavest to be with me, *she* gave me of the tree, and I did eat.” He didn’t accept any responsibility.

Verse 13: “And the woman said, The *serpent* beguiled me, and I did eat.” Adam put all the blame on Eve, partly on God. The woman then blamed the serpent. As the saying goes, the serpent didn’t have a leg to stand on—no one to blame.

Now, you know something? My kids have never done anything bad in their lives. It’s always “Johnny did it.” “I just did what Johnny did.” They express the same human nature that was in Adam and Eve. Peer pressure always turns out to be the culprit. “Somebody else did it,” or “everybody does it.” “They’re really to blame—I’m not.” But this is no excuse.

However strong the influence is of your mate, your girlfriend, your boyfriend, your friend, your parents, is really immaterial. It is your responsibility because you make the choice. You have to an-

swer for it.

Romans 14:12: “So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.”

We need to realize that there is peer pressure, and to be on our guard. *Choose* your friends in other words, because they are going to have an impact upon you. Choose those who can be a right example. If you choose the wrong kind of companions, they’re going to have a bad influence upon you.

I Corinthians 15:33, “Be not deceived: evil communications [associations, as it ought to be rendered] corrupt good manners.”

Galatians 6:4-5: “But let every man prove his own work [put yourself to the test, because you will answer if you do wrong], and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another.” You can have the right satisfaction in the character *you* have developed, the right choice that you made under the circumstance.

Paul goes on to say, “For every man shall bear his own burden.” And in verses 7 and 8: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption [no character]; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.”

Character Development Through Difficulty

We come to another point then: Character development by definition is always difficult.

In Matthew 7:13 Christ talks about the Christian way: “Enter ye in the strait [very narrow, constrictive, hard-to-squeeze-through] gate.” It takes effort to do so: “. . . for wide is the gate [that’s the other choice we could make], and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat.”

So that’s the way the Bible describes it. The Word of God gives us many analogies of the Christian life, such as a fight, mastery of the body, warfare, pulling down strongholds. And all of these things indicate struggle, sweat, effort, work, labor. It’s never defined by easy, float, coast and so on.

Maybe we can understand a bit of the reason. I was reading a book on physical exercise, how physical strength is developed. I quote: “Strength may be defined as the ability to exert force against a resistance. The only way to increase strength is to cause a muscle to pull against heavy resistance.”

I'm sure you see the spiritual parallels. The only way we can develop spiritual strength, spiritual character is to exercise the spiritual muscle against a resistance, these hard choices we have to make—the trials, tests, problems, alternatives.

The apostle Peter talks about character development and strengthening it, and about the positive approach we should have. I Peter 1:6: "Wherein [that is, in the promised incorruptible inheritance] ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations [or trials]." These tests do happen to us, you know. And we're not to be deceiving ourselves by pretending it's not difficult. But what it can develop in your spiritual character is vital. That's why he says in verse 7, "That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ."

The Feel of Success

I know of no greater satisfaction in life than having achieved success. If you play bridge, you know what it's like perhaps to go through the sweat, the trauma of trying to make a grand slam. But you also know the tremendous exhilaration when you win that 13th trick, which makes it all worthwhile and just gobs of fun. In the meantime it's a trauma when you're going trick after trick after trick wondering if you'll make it. And then when you finally do, the exhilaration of victory is something you have to experience.

How good it really does feel, spiritually, when you meet a problem and you're successful with it, fighting a temptation and being victorious over it. There's nothing that is more satisfying than that, is there? And on the other hand, I know of nothing

that is more of a letdown than when you have confronted a temptation and yielded to it.

In II Corinthians 4:7-9, Paul speaks about this difficulty that we all so often face in our life, and the kind of attitude and approach he had. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed [many things we may not understand], but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed."

If we have the goal that Paul had, it becomes that much easier. Verses 16-17: "For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment [compared to eternity], worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." Character is eternal.

Again a rather classic scripture, I Corinthians 9:24-27: "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that you may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery [or as my margin has, everyone who exercises self-control—character development, right choices, determination to train himself for the Kingdom of God] is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection [the self-discipline and control again which is part of character]: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself be a castaway."

There is, finally, one other ingredient we need to develop holy, godly, righteous character which I have not mentioned. We must have power from God—His Holy Spirit. But that is another whole sermon.