

Your Character Wellspring

Verses quoted in this teaching will be taken from the English Standard Version, or ESV.

WHAT IS CHARACTER?

What is character? The early twentieth-century American philosopher William James once put it this way:

I have often thought that the best way to define a man's character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says, "This is **the real me!**"

In short, in James's estimation, your character is "the real you." But this then raises the question, where does the "real you" come from?

God's Word has real, solid answers about our identity and our character, and we will see that they are most fundamentally rooted, not in man's actions or behavior, but in God's gracious gift in Christ.

CHARACTER DEFINED

How can we define character?

Noah Webster offered both concrete and abstract definitions of "character". The concrete definition referred to physical things; the abstract definition was then based on those physical concepts.

Concrete

- A mark made by cutting or engraving on material used to contain writing.

Abstract

- The peculiar qualities impressed by nature or habit on a person which distinguish him from others.

Let's pause for a moment to talk about the physical origin of characters.

Early writing systems made use of a stylus to make marks (or *characters*) in soft clay tablets that were then baked hard to preserve the marks. Clay was the ideal writing surface for capturing characters because it had three important properties.

Clay was:

- *Soft* enough to receive a mark;
- *Firm* enough to retain it; and
- *Durable* enough to have it indelibly baked into it.

Significant parallels can be drawn between the physical and spiritual concepts of character.

By writing on a clay tablet, two purposes were achieved:

1. The characters were preserved; and
2. The characters could serve to communicate to others.

In like manner, by writing God's words on the table of our hearts, we can receive and retain those words, and we can communicate them to others.

Character is:

- That which has made an impression on a man; and also
- That which can make an impression on another man.

To this day, people say things like, "You really made an impression on me" as a statement of the other person's character. Or, "That woman truly made her mark!"

Today we will explore God's Word to learn what character is, and where it comes from. As our journey unfolds, we will begin to discover that character is *less about our works and more about His grace*.

WHERE DOES CHARACTER COME FROM?

Where does character come from?

Someone has said (and I'm paraphrasing here), "You've got to reach down deep inside yourself to grab onto the courage to move ahead." Statements like this show that, in man's assessment, character comes from within.

As believers, though, we understand that character needs a deeper well to draw on than just what we find inside ourselves. It's got to be bigger than just us. And it is.

The answer is, *God is the ultimate Source of character*. All that is excellent and praiseworthy originates with Him.

Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence [Greek ἀρετή *aretē*, moral excellence], if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

God is *the* Most Excellent and Praiseworthy One. Where then does what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable come from? From Him! We are reminded of Joseph's words to Pharaoh: "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer."

Even when we're at our most loving and wonderful, it can't possibly be by our own power or inherent goodness that we manifest all the godly character traits of Christ.

2 Peter 1:1:

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

Everything we have today in God in Christ, we have in and through the faith of Jesus Christ which we obtained with our salvation. Mine is no better or more complete than yours; yours is no better or more complete than mine. That is why Peter here declares that it is “a faith of equal standing with ours.” Neither you nor I did anything to deserve it; and therefore, there is no way that any of us can add anything to it. It is perfect and complete the way God gave it to us.

2 Peter 1:2:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

2 Peter 3:18:

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...

2 Peter opens with “the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” and concludes with the “grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” This knowledge cannot consist of knowing Christ according to the flesh, because he is no longer physically present on earth, but is seated in the heavenlies with his heavenly Father. This grace and knowledge must indicate something greater — and it does.

2 Peter 1:3, 4:

His [God’s] divine power [Greek δύναμις *dunamis*, power to achieve by applying the Lord’s inherent abilities] has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence [Greek ἀρετή *aretē*, moral excellence],

by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers [Greek κοινωνός *koinōnos*, partners with God] of the divine

nature [manifesting God's characteristics], having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

Jesus Christ possessed and exhibited the moral excellence of his Father God. The qualities of moral excellence that enrich our lives by way of the knowledge of God must ultimately derive from *God's* divine power, not ours ("It is absolutely not in me"). This power is the realized potential that enables us to display the characteristics of His nature for all the world to see.

As wonderful as this first section is to understand, the next few verses puzzled me for a long time.

2 Peter 1:5-7:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,

and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness,

and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.

I kept asking myself, "If the faith of Jesus Christ is absolutely complete and is lacking nothing, why do these verses exhort us to supplement it with all these different qualities?"

WHAT DO WE "ADD" TO OUR FAITH?

Before we answer that question, let's examine the seven listed characteristics one by one so we know what they are.

1. The first quality, "virtue", relates numerically to *God*, for there is *one* God.

Virtue is moral excellence like *God's*. Virtue (Greek ἀρετή *aretē*) is that which is both glorious to behold and praiseworthy.

2. The second quality, “knowledge”, relates numerically to *difference*.

Knowledge is the knowledge of *Him* as opposed to the world. It’s the applied knowledge and insight gained by a direct relationship with the Father.

3. The third quality, “temperance” (KJV) or “self-control” (ESV), relates numerically to *completeness*.

Self-control is dominion from within of the entire man (body, soul and spirit).

4. The fourth quality, “patience” (KJV) or “steadfastness” (ESV), relates numerically to the *earth*.

Steadfastness is patient endurance in light of our hope. We persevere, awaiting the return of Christ.

5. The fifth quality, “godliness”, relates numerically to *grace*.

Godliness is the heart’s response in partnership with God through *grace*. Godliness produces true godly reverence, not religion; and as such is the opposite of man’s works.

6. The sixth quality, “brotherly kindness” (KJV) or “brotherly affection” (ESV), relates numerically to *man*.

Brotherly love is the love of one’s fellow believers. (The Greek is φιλαδελφία *philadelphia*, from φίλος *philos*, “loving friend” + ἀδελφός *adelphos*, “a brother”.)

7. The seventh quality, “charity” (KJV) or “love” (ESV), relates numerically to *spiritual perfection*.

Agapē love is self-sacrificing devotion, the love of the Father and His Son, exhibited by Christ and evidenced by us in a godly relationship with God as our Father.

WHY “ADD” TO OUR FAITH?

So, returning to my earlier question, *why add to our faith?* Why supplement it when the faith of Jesus Christ is a full and complete measure?

The qualities we are exhorted to add to our faith, derive not from our inherent worth or goodness, *but from his!* When we add “virtue” (moral excellence), it’s *his* moral excellence; when we add knowledge, it’s the knowledge of *him*; when we add mastery of self, it’s *his* mastery of the entire person of body, soul and spirit; when we add steadfastness, it’s *his* patient endurance in light of the hope; when we add godliness, it’s *his* heart-response in partnership with the Father through grace; when we add love of the brethren, it’s *his* self-sacrificing love for the fellow believers; when we add love of and for the Father, it’s the love *he* had for *his* Father from the beginning.

A CLEAR WAY IN

Now the rest of the passage begins to open up to us like the unobstructed path before us. *In Christ we have a “clear way in”* as we travel onward with God.

2 Peter 1:8-11:

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.

For in this way there will be richly provided [or lavishly supplied] for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

It's the "knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" that makes for the sweetness in life. [In the faith of Jesus Christ, God has provided](#) every aspect of what we need to walk in newness of life, including [all the qualities or character traits of Christ](#). As we ["practice these qualities"](#) in our walk, that paves the way for us as we move forward in the grace of God toward our eternal destination. [It's not "Practice makes perfect"; it's "Practice because we are perfect" in the God in Christ in us.](#)

CHRIST'S CHARACTER EXHIBITED

To gain an even greater appreciation of these various character traits, let's take a look at how Christ exhibited them in his earthly ministry.

Virtue (Moral Excellence)

As we learned earlier, ["virtue" is the glorious, praiseworthy moral excellence that we have through Christ](#). This is most vividly illustrated in a physical sense by Christ's transfiguration before Peter, James and John, which was recorded in three of the four gospels.

Matthew 17:2, 5:

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light...

He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

Christ's glorious appearance in the physical ("his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light") reflected the beauty of the spiritual ("This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased").

We likewise are "transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" when we look to him.

2 Corinthians 3:18:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

We can reflect this beautiful moral excellence because we have the mind of Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:16:

"For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

Knowledge

Jesus Christ's knowledge of his heavenly Father was both real and personal. Unlike the Pharisees, he used the "key of knowledge" to enter into God's presence and share that knowledge with others.

Luke 11:52:

Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering."

Jesus Christ lived "at the ready" and was ever prepared to open the door of his heart to his heavenly Father.

Luke 12:35, 36:

"Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning,

and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.

Self-Control

Jesus Christ was a master of self-control, the perfect example of dominion from within of the self (body, soul and spirit).

We see this most vividly showcased in his response to the devil's temptations after he first received the spirit of God.

Mastery of the Body: Hunger

Jesus Christ showed his mastery of the body in his self-control when faced with hunger after fasting forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 4:2-4:

And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

But he answered, "It is written,
"Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Mastery of the Soul (Mind): Pride

Jesus Christ showed his mastery of the soul (or mind) in his self-control when faced with the temptation to be prideful about his heavenly status as the Son of God.

Matthew 4:5-7:

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple

and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."

Mastery of the Spirit: Worship

Jesus Christ showed his mastery of the spirit in his self-control when faced with the temptation to worship the adversary after being offered all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.

Matthew 4:8-10:

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.

And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"

Steadfastness (Patient Endurance)

When faced with the cross, Jesus Christ remained steadfast and patiently endured it for the joy of the hope that was set before him.

Hebrews 12:2:

looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Godliness (Partnership with God through Grace)

Jesus had confidence in every situation because of his partnership with God through grace. Look at the confession in his prayer when he raised Lazarus.

John 11:41, 42:

So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus Christ concerned himself, not with the outside — for that would be religion — but with the inside (which is true godliness).

Luke 11:40:

... Did not he who made the outside make the inside also?

Love for One's Fellow Believer

As their Lord and Teacher, Jesus showed his love for the disciples by washing their feet.

John 13:14, 15:

If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.

As the good shepherd, Jesus showed his love for the sheep by laying down his life for them.

1 John 3:16:

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

Love of and for God

With his unfailing love of and for his heavenly Father, Jesus Christ personified the great and first commandment.

Matthew 22:37:

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.

Furthermore, having the spirit without measure, Christ was also deeply cognizant of how unreservedly the Father loved him.

John 3:34, 35:

For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure.

The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

GROWING IN THE GRACE AND KNOWLEDGE OF HIM

Clearly Jesus Christ left us the perfect example of virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, love for one's fellow believer, and *agapē* love. 1 Peter exhorts us to "follow in his steps."

1 Peter 2:21:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

We follow in his steps by following his example. We have not only seen the gospel examples of his character traits, but have spiritually obtained the very essence of these qualities by the faith of Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 3:18:

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is no longer physically present with us. [How can we today then grow in the grace and knowledge of him?](#)

Jesus Christ had distinctive qualities or characteristics which distinguished him from all others. Unique among these was that, though tempted in all things like we are, he never sinned.

[Today through God's grace, Christ's sterling character has been made available to us spiritually in its entirety by way of the faith of Jesus Christ.](#) It is absolutely not of works, lest any man should boast.

Having Christ in us spiritually, we can put on the mind of Christ. [We know Christ, not by way of a personal conversational relationship, but by tapping into the spiritual qualities of his moral excellence.](#)

This experiential knowledge of him in our walks could only be enabled by one thing, and that is grace.

John 1:17:

... grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Thank God for Christ's example and all the merits and capabilities God bestowed on us by his accomplished work. [His excellent character is our wellspring to tap. Let's draw and drink deep!](#)