

Sabbath School Today **With the 1888 Message Dynamic**

The Fruit of the Spirit **Lesson 13: “The Essence of Christian Character”**

Sometimes character and reputation are thought to be one and the same. If someone is referred to as a good character it means they have a good reputation. But the two are different. The opinion people have of us is reputation. Our true quality is character. The world values reputation. The Lord’s disciples value character. Some messengers with virtuous character are not appreciated because they bear God’s word, which is not popular. Some bad men disguise their work and the world holds them in high esteem. A good family name is valuable, but a true character cannot be estimated. A good character will stand in God’s judgment and only Christ can build it on the rock.

Good morals or bad morals determine character. A student brings to school a small electronic device for cheating on a test. The student has a dishonest character. A patron stashes an article of clothing from a store rack into her bag and hurries out the door without paying for it. She has a dishonest character. A bully seeks to get his way through tactics of intimidation. He is a proud, dictatorial character.

“Morals is character, and science is knowledge; therefore, moral science is character-knowledge. The study of moral science is the study of the knowledge of character.” [1] When studying moral science, where should we go? Should we study man or God? If we study man’s knowledge we will drink from the sewers. Jesus said: “Out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man” (Mark 7:21-23; cf. Rom. 3:9-18). How long can one study immoral science before he can become moral?

The study of the knowledge of God will produce a divine character. “We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory [character] of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory [from character to character], even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18; cf. Ex. 33:19; 34:6, 7; Jer. 31:3). The study of divine moral science yields the certainty of Christian character perfection.

The Apostle Peter presents the “ladder of Christian progress” [2] as the evidence of those who are “partakers of the divine nature.” “Add goodness to your faith; to your goodness add knowledge; to your knowledge add self-control; to your self-control add endurance; to your endurance add godliness; to your godliness add brotherly affection; and to your brotherly affection add love” (2 Peter 1:5-7, TEV).

In climbing a ladder the eye should be focused on the top. Looking down from the heights causes fear and panic. In every advance step of Christian growth we are ever to keep the eye fixed upon Jesus our great example. Self is a corrupting influence. [3]

Faith is the first rung of the ladder. It is the widest and strongest foundation for motivating all the rest of the fruits culminating in *agape*. It is interesting to note the fact that the ladder begins and ends with the most enduring fruit of them all, which is *agape*. *Agape* is *the* test of Christian character.

Christ is teaching us from the most holy that faith is a thankful response to *agape*. “You may say that you *believe* in Jesus when you have an appreciation of the cost of salvation. You may make this claim, when you feel that Jesus died for you on the cruel cross of Calvary; when you have an intelligent, understanding *faith* that His death makes it possible for you to cease from sin, and to perfect a *righteous character* through the grace of God, bestowed upon you as the purchase of Christ’s blood.” [4] The love of Christ is an inexhaustible supply given to motivate each Christian’s faith. There is no end to the amount of good works that such faith can produce under more abounding grace.

How may we understand this in practical terms? How is a righteous character developed? A righteous character is obedience to the Ten Commandments. A righteous character is a reflection of the image of Christ. A righteous character is a life-long pursuit.

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:15, 16, NIV). The word “let” means “allow” or “do not hinder.” We “let” Christ’s “mind” be in us, in the sense of motivation. “... No man can empty himself of self. We can only *consent* [give permission] for Christ to accomplish the work.” [5]

The power of choice is ours, and what the Lord does in us is always contingent on our choice to let Him do it. It was a wise writer who said this: “What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure.” [6] God actually works into us the will and the power to do (Phil. 2:13). But that does not mean He forces the will without our consent.

A 120-pound woman can drive an 18-wheeler with power steering. She may choose to ever so slightly move the steering wheel to the right or left and the oversized tires will respond as the power steering goes to work. Your choice to say “Yes” to the Holy Spirit who sits alongside you brings instantly all His power to bear, working in you the moral fruits of a righteous character. It is actually easier to be saved than it is to be lost.

—Paul E. Penno

Endnotes:

[1] A. T. Jones, "[Which Character is Moral?](#)" *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Nov. 8, 1898, p. 715.

[2] This was one of Ellen White's favorite themes. See *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 530; *My Life Today*, pp. 95-98.

[3] "... The more closely he resembles Christ in character the more humble will be his opinion of himself; but it will be seen and felt by all around him. Those who have had the deepest experience in the things of God are the farthest removed from pride or self-exaltation. They have the humblest thoughts of self, and the most exalted conceptions of the glory and excellence of Christ. They feel that the lowest place in His service is too honorable for them" (Letter Ellen G. White to Brethren and Sisters Who Shall Assemble at Our Annual Camp-Meetings, May 30, 1882; quoted in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 223.

[4] Ellen G. White, "How Do We Stand?" *Review and Herald*, July 24, 1888.

[5] Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 159.

[6] Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 47.