



Character, Part Two

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What Is Character?

*Character assumes that our actions are not isolated from each other. Character is a pattern of choices flowing out of a person—a pattern of virtues or vices. Character assumes a kind of consistency, integrity, and dependability in our actions. We do not at each moment invent ourselves anew. Stanley Hauerwas in his ground-breaking work, *Character in the Christian Life*, says:*



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For to stress the significance of the idea of character is to be normatively committed to the idea that it is better for men to shape rather than be shaped by their circumstances....

Our actions come out of ourselves—our past choices—and our actions shape ourselves. It is all right to look at each individual action and judge whether it is right or wrong—sin or not a sin. But the neglect of evangelicals, while focusing on the sinfulness of individual behaviors, is to consider how deeply entrenched vices are dealt with. Each individual action either reinforces a previous pattern or not, and each action shapes the self in an accustomed fashion or sets a new path. Perhaps that is why Jesus talks not just of individual actions but of a way of life. Over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus talks about the either/or. There are two ways and only two. Jesus says, “Enter by the narrow gate; for the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.” (Matthew 7:13-14) Thus there are two ways, the broad or the narrow, and you are either headed down one path or the other.

Similarly, there are only two kinds of characters illustrated by Jesus with two trees. He says you will know false prophets “by their fruits.” Why? Because “...every good tree bears good fruit; but the rotten tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree produce good fruit. Every

tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.” (Matthew 7:17-20) Jesus also indicates that the kind of fruit is determined by the kind of tree: “Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they?” You do not get blueberries from an apple tree or peaches from an orange tree. The character of the tree determines the kind of fruit produced.

There are only two foundations that can be laid—one on the rock and one on the sand. Jesus says, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine, and acts upon them may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rains descended and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall.” Repeated obedient actions build the foundation of rock. Repeated acts of disobedience set a person’s life up to be blown away when the storms of life come.

Our actions come out of a kind of root that produces a certain fruit, and our actions also create the kind of foundation that will or will not withstand a storm. Our actions (fruits) come out of our character (good tree or bad tree) and shape our destiny (foundation of rock or sand)!

How To Cultivate Character

Character is won or lost in the little things. There is a classic saying that defines the process better than others:

Sow a thought, reap an act.
Sow an act, reap a habit.
Sow a habit, reap a character.
Sow a character, reap a destiny.

Our thoughts definitely influence our actions. Our actions tend to form entrenched patterns—our habits—virtue or vices. The sum total of these habits (virtue or vices) is our character. And our character certainly influences our destiny. The battle for character is determined in the little thoughts and actions we do. When thoughts and actions are omitted, it can have a devastating impact on our destiny. To borrow the form of an old saying:

For want of a thought,
an act is lost.
For want of an act,
a habit is lost.
For want of a habit,
a character is lost.
For want of a character,
a destiny is lost.

For a number of years I was an instructor for Prison Fellowship, traveling to numerous prisons throughout the country for two- to three-day in-prison seminars. At many of these prisons, I would be inside for about 12 hours at a time. Often I had time during breaks and during lunch and dinner to hear inmates' stories. One inmate was a pharmacist. He started by selling a drug without a prescription to someone who wanted it. That led over time to numerous sales and a whole pattern of drug dealing. He told me that he never imagined when he sold that first drug illegally that he would end up where he was now—in prison.

At another prison, I met a pastor. His wife got involved in an adulterous affair. When he found out, he was so angry that he wanted revenge. So he went to see a prostitute. He saw her again and again. That led to relationships in the underworld—prostitution and drugs. He gradually began (perhaps at first being blackmailed) to get involved in pushing women and drugs. The rumor of his involvement spread on the streets. One day after preaching his sermon, a little nine-year-old girl walked up to him and said, "My mom says you are the best preacher in the whole world, but I don't see how you can be the best preacher and do the things that you do." That comment devastated him. He was appalled at how far down he had fallen. For about a week he scarcely got out of bed. He repented of his sin, but he had to go to prison for the crimes he had committed. This pastor's destiny was profoundly altered by that little thought of revenge and consequently acting on it. He went down the road quite a ways before he turned back.

Sow a Thought, Reap an Act

Deciding what goes into our minds is the beginning of dealing with character. The Bible has a lot to say

about the importance of our thoughts. Paul tells us in Romans 12:2 to "be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." A first step in our transformation involves rejecting those thoughts from the cultural environment around us that are opposed to Christ and, rather than being conformed to that pattern of thinking, to pursue the renewing of our minds. In Ephesians 2:3, Paul indicates that prior to coming to Christ, we can be enslaved, "indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind." Not only the flesh, but the mind is in captivity. In Matthew 12:34, Jesus says that "the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man out of his good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth what is evil. And I say to you that every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the Day of Judgment." So good thoughts in the heart issue good words, and evil words flow out of evil in the heart. The treasure of good thoughts filling the heart spills over into good words and good actions. Matthew 15 says, "It is that which comes out of the heart that defiles."

Another classic verse, Philippians 4:8, contains Paul's charge: "...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things." Thus, we need to guard our hearts and minds because out of these come our words and actions. There are many more such passages.

Sow an Act, Reap a Habit

When we do act rightly and continue in that pattern, virtues are formed. We can look at certain people and know that they are reliable. On the other hand, when we act wrongly and continue in that pattern, it becomes a vice. Bad habits can easily be stopped in their beginnings. However, the more they are practiced, the stronger they become. In the beginning, bad habits are like cobwebs, sticky and unpleasant, but easily broken. However, if not resisted, bad habits become chains that bind us. The word used commonly in the culture is the word "addiction." (Usually it has a negative sense. But William Glasser argued in his book, *Positive Addiction*, that some practices, though habit forming, can be good—maybe just another word for virtues.)

We see rehabilitation centers for addiction to alcohol and drugs. We also hear of sexual addiction. Often addiction begins by providing great initial pleasure, but there is always a law of diminishing returns. A psychiatrist friend, Dr. David Allen, was one of the first to work on treatment of crack cocaine addicts. He said that crack cocaine is the one drug that must never be tried, because it is almost 100% addictive.

This is because it delivers on the first try the highest high you could imagine. Addicts have described it as like having a thousand orgasms or having Christmas every day. But because of the depletion of a chemical in the brain, you never get the same high again. The second high is always less than the first, and the third less high than the second and so on. Addicts have said that they could see the first high from the second, but not get there. After a while, the addict gets very little positive pleasure from the cocaine but has to treat the cocaine depression—the withdrawal that happens if they do not continue.

In many ways, this phenomenon—the law of diminishing returns—is a parable about what happens with all sinful habits. Initially, the act is filled with pleasure, but not too far down the road comes the tyranny of the addiction and increasing loss of pleasure. That initial pleasure is like a hook that then draws you in. It is better to stop the habit in the beginning or as with crack cocaine, not begin at all.

Sow a Habit, Reap a Character

In Hebrews 5:14, we see the whole process from thought to character described in a nutshell. This verse says, “But solid food is for the mature, who, because of practice, have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” First, you must take in not milk but solid food—meaning in-depth teaching rather than just the basics (see Hebrews 5:12-14). Second, these thoughts need to not just stay in the mind but be put into practice regularly so that they become habit and issue in the characteristic of wisdom. Then our “senses are trained to discern good and evil.” We need solid biblical content and regular practice of it in order for character and wisdom to be produced.

Sow a Character, Reap a Destiny

Often character flaws profoundly affect a person’s destiny. A wrong word or phrase has destroyed the careers of radio and television announcers. Politicians have let go a slip of the tongue and lost power and position because of it. I once heard a proverb: A slip of the tongue leads to a slip of the mind, which leads to a slip of the soul. Something slips out of the tongue and because of pride has to be rationalized and justified (slip of the mind). But that very denial of our original mistake leads to a “slip of the soul.”

Our destiny is like a diet. Dieting is won or lost in the little things. You may start with great resolve, so for breakfast you have orange juice and a piece of toast without butter. Lunch consists of a small piece of broiled chicken and a salad with no salad dressing. For an afternoon snack, you have one Oreo cookie; then later in the afternoon, the rest of the package. For dinner there is a large pizza with everything on it and

a large cheesecake (the whole thing). Well, you get the idea. What is the problem with the one Oreo cookie? I have heard that you could have a diet consisting of Oreo cookies if you did not eat too many. But the problem is that our resolve is broken and, like taking our finger out of a dike, the flood waters flow in. It takes only a moment of irresolution to alter your destiny.

The C. S. Lewis Institute used to have (for 10 years) a summer program on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay. The property there was expensive to maintain and the least obvious things were the most expensive. Around the edge of the property was built a sea wall consisting of large rocks that cost tens of thousands of dollars to install. The owner of the property next door did not put out the money to build a sea wall and lost about five acres or more of valuable land to the bay. Erosion is a perennial problem on the Eastern Shore and in our own lives. When we neglect time in Scripture and time in prayer, we do not always see or feel immediate consequences. It may take time before the erosion is evident. On the property there is a house not far from the shore. If there were no sea wall, the house would fall into the bay, not this year or next year and maybe not even in five or ten years. But sooner or later that house would be destroyed. Often people fall in private before they fall in public. There is a tendency for prayer to drive out sin or for sin to drive out prayer. The erosion, unless battled, is relentless.

Another problem on this Eastern Shore property is accumulation of silt. At one time large boats could come right up a channel and dock in the harbor there, but because of silt accumulation, the channel needs to be dredged and that is a difficult and expensive proposition. So in our lives there can be an accumulation of silt that can muddy the waters and make it difficult for us to see clearly. Periodically, we need to dredge the channel so that clear water can flow again and we can restore clear communication with our Lord. Once the dredging is done, it has to be maintained or silt accumulates again.

Often when the big moments come, the decisions have already been made. Iris Murdoch writes, “At crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over.” The habitual patterns of vice or virtue make it well nigh irresistible to choose otherwise. The battle for our destiny is fought not just at the big moments, but in the little decisions made previously. A list of taboos may not work when a young man and woman are in the back seat of a car. What happens there is often a matter of previous thoughts and choices. It is also influenced by considering the outcome—our destiny. Thomas Aquinas said the two vices that most obscure the future consequences of our actions are lust and covetousness. What are the future consequences of this

choice? What kind of life do I want to live? What kind of person do I want to be? What is to be the story of my life? Will my choice now affect my destiny later? Sadly, many have found out that it does. My choice now can have a profound impact on the outcome of my life.

On the positive side, you can prepare for heroic acts by living your ordinary lives well. The best preparation for the big moments are all the little moments when you choose the right thing.

Creating Character

So how do we reverse patterns that we don't like? Obviously, we have to start with our thoughts and resolve to act in a different manner. That is a beginning, but this resolution will not necessarily take us where we

want to go. The process of change involves commitment, conscience, community, and courage.

Lord, help us face defects in our character and resolve to deal with them starting in our thoughts and acts.

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