

Why Christian Character Matters

January 15th, 2009 was another ordinary day in New York City. US Airways Flight 1549 bound for Charlotte, North Carolina, was preparing for takeoff from LaGuardia Airport at 3:26 pm. The Captain, Chelsea “Sully” Sullenberger, started his aviation career in 1969, flying in the Air Force until 1980 when he was hired as a commercial pilot by US Airways. Over the course of his career, he had logged more the 20,000 hours of flying. If Malcolm Gladwell is right and it take 10,000 hours of practice to become and expert, it’s safe to say Sullenberger was an expert pilot.

This proved to be valuable on this day because only two minutes after takeoff the plane ran into a flock of geese, damaging both engines. What made the situation even more tense was the fact that they were flying over the Bronx—one of the most densely populated areas of the city of New York; and that’s saying something.

Sully and his co-pilot had to make a staggering number of decisions in a short amount of time if they were to save, not just the 155 souls on board, but people on the ground below. You probably know how the story turns out...they somehow manage to land the plane safely in the Hudson river and get everyone on the plane out safely.

When the headlines came out afterward they dubbed this “the Miracle on the Hudson.” But do you want to know a secret? Maybe you’ll think less of me because of it,

but I don't believe this was a miracle at all. That doesn't mean God didn't have his hand on the situation, but I don't believe it was a miracle. Captain Sullenberger was able to land that plane safely and save all 155 people onboard because he had studied faithfully, relentlessly honed his craft, because he had logged more than 20,000 hours and been through countless small trials throughout the years.

Of course, God gave him the natural aptitude to become a pilot and a passion for flying. God gave him everything he needed to be a pilot. But over the years, he had taken the natural ability God gave him and developed it so that when the time of crisis came, he didn't have to pull out the flying manual to figure out what to do. He was able to do it because flying had become "second nature."

Our society puts a lot of energy into making the world safer. The airline industry has countless regulations to make flying safer. We have building codes so our houses don't collapse; government agencies that regulate the food industry; public service announcements and social media campaigns to prevent bullying and sexual harassment. And I don't think this is a bad impulse at all. People are living longer and have a higher standard of living than any time in history. We should all be thankful for that. (Although does anyone else miss rusty merry-go-rounds and lawn darts?)

But at the same time, I'm afraid our focus on safety has caused us to neglect something and I believe that neglect has hurt us greatly. You see, the fact is no matter

how hard we try, we'll never be able to rid the world of pain, suffering, hurt, trials or temptations.

What we've neglected is *developing inner strength*. We call this inner strength "character." Sometimes we refer to it as "virtue." The theologian N.T. Wright describes it this way, "*Virtue...is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices, requiring effort and concentration, to do something which is good and right but which doesn't "come naturally"—and then, on the thousand and first time, when it really matters, they find that they do what's required "automatically."*

OK, you say, that's fine. I understand that character is a good thing, but why does character matter for the Christian? After all, aren't we saved by grace? Maybe Christian character is good for the super-Christians and over-achievers. Being saved is the important thing. Character is kind of optional.

The problem is, we don't see this attitude anywhere in the Bible. Developing Christ-like character is something every believer should strive for. There are a number of reasons why.

The first reason is purely practical: *good character protects us*. Character isn't always a matter of sin. Sometimes it's just simple wisdom. And we need wisdom because, like we said, the world isn't safe. Insurance companies know this. That's why they have the best commercials. [lost phone commercial clip] Now, I know this actually happens,

because a number of years ago, my truck got hit by a teenager searching for his phone.

[smashed truck photo] But probably my favorite is this one. [Pink SUV Teenage driver clip]

As good as insurance is, exercising the character trait of prudence is better. The character trait of *discretion* can protect friendships and *chastity* can guard your marriage.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel, who was known for integrity, honesty and faithfulness, had risen to a high position in the Babylonian government, which of course made many other men jealous. It says in Daniel 6 that many of the other officials **“tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.” (Daniel 6:4)**

With all of the accusations of sexual misconduct coming out recently, I bet there are a lot of men who lacked *respect* and *honor* and *chastity* sweating bullets, terrified for their career or marriage. Consistent, godly character protects us.

But there are reasons that go even deeper than just staying out of trouble. You see, when we develop godly character, *we get closer to what God created us to be*. Let me show you. Turn with me to 2 Peter 1. I’m going to take you on a little tangent here, then we’ll circle back to this point.

Some people are skeptical that we can ever really develop godly character because over the years there are still things they still struggle with, whether its qualities like

laziness, procrastination, and worry or sins like bitterness, anger and lust. And because they've tried and still haven't conquered them, they believe it's impossible.

In fact, I see this creep into the church. We focus a lot on *grace* in the church and rightly so. But our understanding of grace is skewed. Some people believe we can do nothing more than sin in thought, word and deed every day—that we are *just* sinners saved by grace. They believe grace is only good for forgiveness. So, we sin, God forgives, and anyone who tries to go beyond that is trying to *earn* their salvation.

This is not biblical thinking. Let me show you. [read 3-11]

Did you catch that? Right at the beginning in verse 3, **“God has given you everything you need for life”**—which is more than just surviving. It's the Greek word *zoe* which means “fullness of life,” **“and godliness.”**

So, let's go over this. Here are some things you cannot do. You cannot fly without an airplane or some kind of gliding apparatus. You cannot fold a fitted sheet nicely. You cannot predict the future. And you cannot *earn* your salvation. God loves you not because of anything great you've done, but because he is faithful.

Here's what you *can* do—you *can develop godly character*. Why can you do that? Is it because you're awesome? No. It's because God has given you everything you need. You're not doing it in your own strength. God is the one who provides the strength and resources. What you have to do is develop it.

For Christmas, my wife got me a cast-iron pizza pan and my daughter, Ellie got me a pizza-making book. So, I've been learning a lot about making pizza dough. The critical ingredient in dough is yeast. Yeast sits in these packets and does nothing for a very long time. As long as it's in the packet, nothing will change. Yeast has a special power, but it can't do anything until it's activated. To activate it, you add warm water, flour and salt. The yeast eats the sugars in the flour and burps carbon dioxide and that process completely changes the dough.

Let me show you. [dough pic] These two dough balls had the same amount of flour, salt and water at 95°. But the one on the right has 3 grams of yeast. At the beginning they look the same, but after two hours, look at the difference. [2 hour dough] The yeast wouldn't grow until I created the right environment for it. Then it was activated.

God's divine power is the active ingredient in your growth—it's everything you need for life and godliness. When you know Jesus, that power is already inside you. That power is the grace of God that we receive through Jesus' death and resurrection. That grace is the assurance that we have been forgiven and we don't have to be preoccupied with our sins and failures or spend the rest of our lives trying to make up for the bad things we've done. God forgives us—now move on.

But grace is also the power of the Holy Spirit working in us to grow us. When you put your faith in Jesus, and create the right environment for growth, the Holy Spirit is

activated, so to speak—convicting, teaching, encouraging and strengthening. It transforms your life if you're willing to put in the effort to create the right environment.

So, that's the long way to get to the point, but the result is that through the power of God's grace and our effort, we can become what God intended. Verse 4 says that God has given us all this power, **“so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”** Participate in the divine nature—sounds serious, but what does it mean?

Back in September in our last focus season, we said that everyone you meet is a masterpiece. Ephesians 2:10 says, **“You are God's masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for you to do.”** What he's referring to there is the same thing Peter is hinting at here. That masterpiece he's talking about you, created in God's image. Of all the creatures on earth, humans are the only ones made in the image of God. That means you have incalculable worth. It also means that you have a responsibility to care for the world as God's representative.

Over the years, through sin, struggle, hurts, bad parenting, whatever, that Image gets muddied and torn. The image is still there, but God wants to *reveal* it. We are unable to clean ourselves up, but Jesus can. The church father Athanasius says about Jesus, *“He became what we are that we might become what he is.”* When you develop godly character, you look more like Jesus, who is the perfect example of what it means to live in

the image of God. So, don't let anyone tell you that you are *just* a sinner saved by grace. You are that, but you are so much more.

So, through the power of the grace of God, as your character becomes more like Jesus, you become better able to accomplish what God created you to accomplish. Peter writes in verse 8 that developing these character qualities in increasing measure, **“will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** That's a pretty good reason why Christian character matters, don't you think?

The third reason character matters for us is because the next generation is watching us. One of the most important jobs we have as believers is to pass the faith along to the next generation—our kids, other people's kids, new Christians who might not be kids, but they're watching us. Is what we say about finding life in the relationship with Jesus really true? Does it actually make a difference in our lives, or is it just some strange and irrelevant doctrine we have? Does it really make us better, more humble, more loving and selfless? If it doesn't, we'll have a whole generation of people who will say, “If that's all it means to be a Christian, no thanks.” I'd rather sleep in on Sunday.

Three pretty good reasons, don't you think? So, the question is, “how?” Well, we're going to answer that question over the next few weeks as we talk about specific character traits, but let me get you started with some thoughts that we'll unpack later.

The first two, more than steps are really the conditions for developing godly character. The first we talked about already; *you have to believe it's possible*. I've known people who don't even believe it's possible, so they don't even try. Or if they did try at one time, they got discouraged and determined "well, I guess it just doesn't work." But if you believe Scripture, you have to know that it is impossible.

Second, make sure you *want to*. Sounds pretty elementary, but it's not a given. Some people are just fine where they are. They get by. They're overall, pretty nice and tolerant people, so why try to go beyond that? Their current character hasn't gotten them in trouble yet.

I have to admit, this is a struggle I've had in my life. Do I really want to discipline myself? Do I really want to deny myself short-term pleasures for long-term growth? This question isn't just a big-picture question. It's a question you have to answer over and over. With every temptation, there's always a moment where you have to decide, "Am I going to give in to these lustful thoughts? Do I want to resist the immediate gratification I get when I retaliate against the person who hurt me." Regardless of how you answer now, it's what you do in those 10 seconds that's the real answer to this question.

Third, *make every effort*. This is Peter's application in verses 5 and 10. He says, since God has given you the power you should "make every effort..." There's that word Christians are so afraid of. Am I doing this through my own strength? This question ties

people up in knots. That's completely unnecessary. No one said Christ-likeness would be easy. In fact, listen to how the writer of Hebrews encourages Christians, **"In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."**

He's talking about Jesus in garden who was tempted to bail on God's plan shed drops of blood. The writer of Hebrews said, "you're not there yet, so stop whining and press on."

Great motivational speaker, right?

No one said, growth is easy. It's not. Especially early on. Like starting to get in shape. You try to run that first mile and you will feel terrible. But over time, through practice and hard work, you'll begin to relish that growth. But you have to make every effort. It can't be a casual pursuit. It takes single-mindedness.

Fourth, *don't get discouraged*. It takes time and what matters isn't where you are right now, but it's what direction you're heading. Look at the long process Peter highlights in verse 5, **"add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love."**

Got that? That's a long process; adding things on top of each other—goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness. This stuff takes time so don't get discouraged if you're not there yet. Press on.

Finally, *lean on your church community*. We can't do this alone. Peter isn't writing his letter to one person. He's writing it to "brothers and sisters" in the church. We're in this together and we need each other. We need to submit to one another. We need to encourage one another. We may even need to challenge each other and hold each other accountable. That's the reason for small groups. You can't do it alone.

In fact, if you look at Peter's process in verse 5-7, notice what's at the end of that process. It starts with faith to goodness, to knowledge...all the way through and the ultimate endpoint is...LOVE. The pinnacle of character is the ability to love—God and the people around you. You cannot learn to love people if you avoid them. You cannot learn to love people if you keep them at arm's length. You have to dig in deep until you learn what it means to love like Jesus.

And in the end, I love what Peter tell us is the outcome... **"For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."** Do these things, and even when times are really hard, your life and your faith becomes unshakable.

[Communion]