



LESSON #5 THE CHARACTER OF A LEADER

“One of the serious dangers of leadership is appointing a person prematurely before they are spiritually mature enough to carry the weight of leading others. It is better to leave a position empty than to place the wrong person in it before they're fully qualified, emotionally and spiritually. For the sake of the potential leader as well as the people following, there must be a proving time which will reveal the state of their character which is essential for successful leadership.”

Out of all the fundamental lessons on leadership, this is the one that is most important for a leader to achieve. Volumes could be written and studied about godly character. Why is character so important in managing God's House? Because people are watching you! Paul expressed that reality in 2 Corinthians 6:3,

“We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us, and no one will find fault with our ministry. In everything we do, we show that we are true ministers of God”

In other words, we must not be the cause of someone stumbling in their walk with the Lord. My son, Matthew, is an ordained minister with Pillar of Fire Churches International. That did not happen overnight. He has proven his ministry and godly character over the course of years with many various ministries and leaders. He will not compromise in small or great matters that are wrong. He and his wife, Cindy, took their two children to a movie and brought snacks with them. As they approached the ticket booth, he read a sign stating that no outside food or drink was allowed in the theatre. He shared with me how easily he could have taken the concealed snacks right to their seats with no one knowing, but his conviction would not allow it. His wife and two children watched him take the snacks back to the car. That is character, and when God sees that we will not compromise in the small tests, He can trust us in the big tests that come with promotion upon passing.

Some years ago, the young family that lived beside us put their house up for sale, and two women who were involved in a relationship together, became our new neighbours. Somehow, they found out that we were Christians and in the ministry. It was told to us that they were apprehensive to get to know us because they thought we would just condemn them for their lifestyle. And so Julie and I would pray for them and politely say hello in passing. Six months later, as we pulled into our shared driveway, our neighbours were sitting out back and signalled us to come over. This is what they wanted to tell us. *“We just want you to know that we’ve been watching you and you’re the real deal!”* I don’t think anyone could have given us a greater compliment because they observed our genuine character, not our condemnation. How important to be the “real deal” and not hypocrites.

TRIALS DEVELOP GODLY CHARACTER

How true the words of Dr. David Jeremiah, speaking of Joseph, *“Our character, if genuine, is never altered by circumstances. Nothing exemplifies our moral fiber like the way we face difficulties. It’s a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate the reality and the integrity of our character before others.”* If you’re familiar with the story of Joseph in Genesis 39, you know that his integrity was severely tested by his master’s wife who enticed him in every way she could to lay with her. His character beamed as he answered, *“How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?”* Joseph wasn’t concerned about getting caught—he was concerned about dishonouring God! His uncompromised integrity enabled God to raise him up to a high position of leadership in Egypt. Character is not something inherited, like your height or hair colour—like Joseph, it is developed through personal trials which require right choices and actions on the part of a leader. Describe a recent trial that God used to develop your character.

Oswald Chambers wrote in his classic devotional, “My Utmost For His Highest”, *“A higher state of spiritual vision can only be achieved through the higher practice of personal character. Have you heard God say, “Come up higher,” not audibly on the outer level, but to the innermost part of your character?”* Our unspoiled character will take us up higher in the things of God that He has reserved for us in our leadership position. God may work slow, but He works. He’s continually testing our character to the degree that He is able to entrust the keys of the Kingdom to. Keys represent authority and access; character will unlock the door to your destiny like nothing else can. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day despised sinners—in their self-righteous minds, they were unclean.

And yet Jesus ate and drank with the lowest of the low which earned Him the reputation of being the “friend of sinners”. He affected them and not the other way around. 1 Corinthians 15:33 warns us that “*bad company corrupts good character*”. As leaders, we must be careful not to jeopardize our character by fellowshiping with the wrong crowd, but that does not mean we should never associate with them. How else are we going to influence them for the Kingdom? Jesus began His world-wide Church with those voted most likely not to succeed!

So then, where does a leader draw the line in associating with “bad company”? Sometimes in our sincere effort to win the lost, we end up compromising on our integrity to make sinners feel better about themselves and that we’re no different than them. This is wrong. There is a real danger in compromising our convictions to make people feel more comfortable in their sin. They already know it’s wrong. When your godly character is at risk of becoming corrupted by bad company, you face the temptation of gradually joining in with their worldly parties and their profane jokes. At that point, you lose your witness for Christ because you lost your character. That is the real danger of “*bad company corrupting good character*”.

THE FOUNDATION OF CHARACTER IS INTEGRITY

One of the greatest aspects of any leader’s character is his or her integrity. The word “integrity” is recorded 16 times in the Bible. Six of those references are found in the Psalms, and rightly so, for David was the epitome of “integrity”. Although David in his later years was guilty of gross, moral failure, his tearful, heartfelt repentance was sincere and brought healing and restoration to his broken life. Our greatest failure does not define us—repentance, humility and integrity is what defines our true character. Those were the qualities of David that God looked for in the man He would appoint to replace King Saul who forfeited Israel’s throne through disobedience and pride. It was at the time when David was fleeing in the hills and mountains from Saul and his army who was bent on killing him in a rage of jealousy. David suffered much persecution and false accusation at the time of him writing this Psalm. “*But as for me, I will walk in my integrity, redeem me, and be merciful unto me.*” Psalm 26:11. Even when his own men desperately tried to convince David on two occasions to destroy his mortal enemy, King Saul, when he had the chance, it was his integrity and faith in God that enabled him to resist the prime opportunities to do so. He would do no harm to the Lord’s anointed.

Charles Spurgeon penned these words about David’s integrity which enabled God to exalt him to kingship. “*David had not used any traitorous or unrighteous means to gain the crown, or to keep it; he was conscious of having been guided by the noblest principles of honour in all his actions with regard to Saul and his family.*”

In your own words, describe what integrity looks like to you as a leader.

In Psalm 26:1, David prays a bold and dangerous prayer—

“Judge me, O LORD; for I have walked in my integrity: I have trusted also in the LORD; therefore I shall not slide.”

Right now, even with your flaws and imperfections, could you honestly pray that prayer before an all-knowing God? Would your prayer and my prayer be something like this? *“Go ahead and judge me, righteous God, You won’t find anything displeasing or unrighteous in me—You’ll only see my moral innocence”*. Before we go any further in this lesson, let’s take a moment and consider if we are aware of any sin or compromise that the Holy Spirit has been dealing with us about. Thank God for the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Whether we have sinned wilfully and knowingly or in sincere ignorance, oblivious to any failure or shortcoming, we need to be clean vessels for the Spirit of God to flow through.

We are not the final authority in judging our own character, God forbid, but He is. That’s why David prayed so assuredly, *“I have trusted also in the Lord...”* We need to understand that he was in no way placing his confidence in his own sense of moral innocence—that’s why in another psalm, he again invited God to examine him thoroughly and reveal to him any hidden sin not conscious of.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: 24 And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Psalm 139:23-24

It’s no wonder God called David a man after His own heart—his lifestyle of integrity spoke for itself in God’s righteous judgement—it defined David’s upright character which empowered God to entrust him with the throne. That sums up the character of a leader—one who is consistent in integrity—not doubleminded, not unstable, not back and forth and up and down. The uprightness of a great leader doesn’t change just because they’ve had a bad day—you’re going to have a lot of bad days in leadership but your integrity will thrive! You need to accept the fact that as a leader, you will have followers that are for you, and followers that are against you—no matter what decisions you make. That is why you must be confident in your character and integrity that withstands criticism and accusation.

There is no place for pleasing people and following the crowd. What can you do to prevent the unjust criticisms, negative comments and abusive opinions of others to infect your decision making with uncertainty, confusion or second thoughts?

CHARACTER MUST BE MAINTAINED THROUGHOUT LIFE

Myles Munroe, who finished his course on this earth with outstanding character, wrote this in his excellent book, “The Power of Character in Leadership”—
“The only way to stay focused on your vision and keep moving forward in the midst of the inevitable stress, criticism, attacks, temptations, and setbacks that come with leadership is to develop personal character. The more exposure a leader has to the public—the more fame he acquires—the more influence he exerts—the more vigilant he must be to maintain deep, well-established character”

Without a doubt, Billy Graham was the most recognized spiritual voice of the past century. He preached his first sermon at the age of 18. His message lasted eight minutes. When the service was over, one of the men at the church approached young Billy and scolded him, ‘*Boy, you better go back to school and get a lot more education because you’re not gonna make it!*’ That’s a bad day! But Billy Graham maintained his character until the day he died! Rev. Graham was quoted as saying, “*When character is lost, all is lost*” Character is foundational for a leader.

Let’s end this lesson with one final account of a time when I was unwittingly being tested by a first-time visitor to our church in Orillia. I had just finished preaching, and after the service, I was enjoying a coffee with our church family. I introduced myself to a small framed, older woman who attended that morning. She commented that she enjoyed the sermon, but pointed out a mistake I had apparently made in my message. Naturally, I was taken by surprise by her brazenness and her bold correction towards a pastor that she had only met for the first time. I could feel something rising up in me in resistance to her forwardness towards my preaching. But rather than being offended, which is what the enemy would have preferred, I sincerely thanked her for her concern and told her I would study into that. And then came the bombshell! She informed me that she was deliberately putting me to the test to see how I would react to her “correction”. And then with a big grin, she said, “*You passed the test!*”. And from that day, she became one of our precious, loyal church members. So, don’t be surprised when God puts your character to the test in unexpected and even unorthodox ways!