

Temperament, Character, and Spiritual Gifts

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1. **Introduction**: Our character affects everyone and everything we come in contact with. Good character is not inborn but must be developed. Thought, speech, emotions, and actions must be trained and disciplined. Understanding “right and wrong” is vital. Everyone has a God-given conscience which causes us to feel good when we do what we know is right and to feel bad when we do what we know to be wrong. Scripture defines right and wrong for Christians.
2. **Bad Character is Present in All Levels of Society**: The truth of the depravity of man is proven by headlines every day. Men and women of all varieties do things that stagger the imagination, so astounding that you can only say “what on earth were they thinking.” People in powerful positions and of great wealth are no exception. Bad character is not rare.
3. **Quote from Reagan**: Here is a striking statement about character by President Ronald Reagan. It highlights the constant effort necessary to develop and maintain good character. Reagan said, “**The character that takes command in moments of crucial choices has already been determined. It has been determined by a thousand other choices made earlier in seemingly unimportant moments. It has been determined by all those “little” choices of years past – by all those times when the voice of conscience was at war with the voice of temptation, whispering a lie that ‘it doesn’t really matter.’ It has been determined by all the day-to-day decisions made when life seemed easy and crises seemed far away, the decisions that, piece by piece, bit by bit, developed habits of discipline or of laziness; habits of self-sacrifice or self-indulgence; habits of duty and honor and integrity – or dishonor and shame.**”
4. **Good Character Takes Time and Focus**: Crises reveal character, but the character revealed was formed in the past through the thought, decisions, and actions of every day. The little anonymous poem many of us know makes that point. “*Sow a thought, reap an action! Sow an action, reap a habit! Sow a habit, reap a character! Sow a character, reap a destiny!*”
5. **Little Things Matter**: Step-by-step little things lead to greater consequences. A slight but constant drift from the “straight and narrow” is all that is needed to ultimately yield utter wickedness. Good character is the work of a lifetime requiring constant attention. All Christians are destined to be Christ-like in character, a transformation made possible by the Holy Spirit.
6. **Biblical Instruction on Character**: Scripture has much to say about character. In a broad sense Christian character is to be consistent with the revealed character of God. To direct us in right living, God gives us a **purpose** – to do all things to His glory. In doing so, we find joy and completion. He also gives a more detailed pattern of right living in the form of principles and specific commands and instructions. He insures we have all we need for life and godliness by sending His Holy Spirit to indwell us, directing and enabling life by God’s pattern.
7. **Character Building Through Building Forms**: Acquiring Christ-like character requires “putting off” bad character traits and behavior as well as “putting on good character traits and

“righteous behavior” (Eph 4:20-24). As the Holy Spirit works to transform us into a likeness of Christ, we are to cooperate by thinking thoughts, having attitudes, speech, and actions that correspond with His gracious work.

- Paul urges us to put off our old self, which is corrupted by deceitful desires, and having been made new in the attitude of our mind, to put on a new self that is like God in true righteousness. The indwelling Holy Spirit enables both “putting off” and “putting on.”
- Christians are to “put off” (eliminate) lying, anger, stealing, unwholesome talk, bitterness, rage, and malice from their life (Eph 4:25-32). Sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, obscenity, foolish talk, and coarse joking are intolerable vices for a Christian (Eph. 5:3-4).
- With the Holy Spirit’s, Christians are to “put on” Godly traits including love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).
- But, how do we “put off” the bad and “put on” the good? How do we produce new patterns of thought, attitude, and behavior? We have all tried to break some bad habit and often experienced discouragement. We focus our mind, boost our will power, set to work, and just when we think we have it licked – the bad habit exhibits itself again!
- Or we are about to pray or read our bible and thoughts or images come into our mind that would make us blush with shame if others could know them. Or perhaps we see progress in our Christian life, but a situation erupts that makes us lose our cool, evoking a reaction so hostile we can’t believe it was us who did it. Experiences like these highlight the gap that exists between what we are and what we know we ought to be – the righteousness gap.
- What can we do to close the righteousness gap? How can we break bad habits and develop good ones? We must, of course, depend on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. But we are to work with Him and to not grieve or quench Him. How can we cooperate with the Holy Spirit in developing good character?
- Larry Christenson in his book, the **Renewed Mind** (1974), makes 3 useful observations: (1.) There is an ongoing struggle between our desire to “live by the Spirit” and the urgings of our “sinful nature.” (2.) Scripture tells us there are some things we can and must do – but other things only God can do. (3.) We get into trouble when we confuse the two.
- Phil. 2:12-13 says we are to “work out” our salvation for it is God who “works in” us “to will and to work for his good pleasure.” “Work out” concerns what we are to do, while “works in” concerns what God must do. In Gal. 5:16 Paul gives us further insight saying, “walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Martin Luther’s comment on this verse says we should follow the Spirit as our guide and resist the flesh, for **that is all we are able to do**. Luther’s point is we should be able to resist (to not gratify) the desires of our sin nature, but we cannot eliminate the desires.
- This is an important insight. There are things we can and should do, other things only God can do. Knowing what is expected of us is important, but equally important is to know what is not expected. Trying to do in our own power what only God can do is an error as great as failing to do what we can and should do. We are able to “not gratify” the desires of our sin nature, but we cannot eliminate the desires themselves.

- As the Holy Spirit “works in” us to transform us into a likeness of Christ, we are to “work out” That which we have been enabled to do. To do our part and avoid trying to do God’s part, we need to know how God intends the labor of transformation to be divided.
- Psalm 51 and other passages help us understand the intended division of labor. In Ps. 51:6-12, David asks God to teach him wisdom in his inmost places, to cleanse him, to create in him a pure heart, to renew a steadfast spirit within him, to restore to him the joy of his salvation, and to grant him a willing spirit to sustain him. In all these actions it is God who must act and David who is to be acted upon. Whatever change takes place deep in the center of our being is the work of God. He alone can change the essence of who we are.
- Col. 3:12-14 deals with things believers are enabled and required to do. As God’s chosen ones, believers are to “clothe themselves” with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. They are to bear with each other, forgiving whatever grievances they may have against one another, to forgive as the Lord forgave us. Over all those virtues, they are to put on love which binds all the virtues together in perfect harmony. These are all things a believer is enabled and expected to do.
- As the change of our inmost being is God’s work, so the outward visible work of “clothe yourself,” “put on,” and “put off” is work for the believer. Putting the two pieces together, we find that in the transformation of a believer into a likeness of Christ, **God will work the necessary inward change in the inmost being.** He enables and requires **the believer to put on the outward form of Christ-likeness.** Both things are extended in time.
- A pretty good analogy is the process of building a concrete structure. Temporary forms are built. The forms are rough in appearance, but define the shape and volume of the desired structure. The real structure is formed by pouring mixed cement into the forms, smoothing and leaving it to cure. At the right time, the forms are removed. What is left is the real structure. Forms are necessary, but temporary. So it is with us as we “clothe ourselves” and “put on” the outward signs of righteousness. God fills those forms in our innermost parts.
- We build forms defining the outward shape of right behavior. God fills the forms with the real thing making actual behavior and motivation consistent.
- Suppose there is a person you don’t much like, and you have a problem being kind to them. God says, OK, I understand. But what you can and must do in obedience to Me is to be kind to that person. So in obedience to God you do just that. God promises that, honoring your obedience, He will give you the true attitude of kindness by a change in your heart. He pours the essence of kindness into the forms that you build by your obedient actions.
- Impatience and anger are attitudes of the heart. Only God can eliminate them. But God does not tell us to change heart attitudes. What He expects from us is that we build the outward form of the right attitudes, or as Scripture says, “put on” the right attitudes. We cannot eliminate sinful attitudes, but we can refuse to gratify those attitudes. We make a big mistake if we try to do God’s job, which we cannot do, and ignore the job, we can do. As we repeatedly obediently “put on” right behavior, though it is in form only, God will change our innermost being to give us the real thing – actions and desires perfectly aligned.

- It would be pointless to “put on” the outward form of a virtue if we doubted God will use our obedient actions to work the genuine virtue in us. We trust God to reward obedience with the reality of new heart attitudes. We know outward conformity to “patience” we obediently “put on” will never be as beautiful or true as the real thing. It is not intended to be – it is an active expression of faith God will form in us patience that is real and beautiful.
- Gal 5:26 doesn’t say we will not have desires from our sinful nature – it says that if we live by the Spirit we will not gratify them. We won’t allow them outward expression. If someone offends us or interferes with what we are trying to do – our sin nature stirs up a desire to lash out at the offender. The verse doesn’t say don’t feel that way. What it says is, don’t gratify that desire. Don’t speak those cutting words. Don’t try to get even.
- Our task is the outward temporary work; God does the inward lasting work! Ultimately the temporary form is filled with God’s genuine workmanship. Our transformation into Christ-likeness is truly a work of God’s grace. Yet, He graciously enables and requires us to participate. It is important to cooperate with the Holy Spirit by building outward forms of righteousness in expectant trust that God will replace the temporary forms with His reality.
- It may seem to us that the use of “outward forms” involves hypocrisy. If we say kind words or act in a thoughtful and nice way – when our feelings are just the opposite – doesn’t that make us hypocrites? No! A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be something he is not – but, we admit the reality of our sinful desires. In obedience to God, we build forms. We are honest before him, trusting him to work in us that which is pleasing to him (Heb 13:21).
- When we study Christ’s works, we see he often required the person receiving a miracle to do some outward thing. Jesus put wet clay on a blind man’s eyes and told him to wash in the nearby pool – when he did as he was told, the miracle was complete, and he could see. A man with a withered arm was told to stretch out his arm – just what he could not do – in faith he tried, and the miracle was complete – his arm stretched out.
- So it is with building forms – try to do the righteous thing even if you don’t feel like it or don’t think you can. Don’t gratify sinful urges even if you do feel like it. God will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear, and when we are tempted He will also provide a way out (1Cor 10:13). We need not be enslaved to how we “feel” or to what we “want” at any given moment. We walk by faith, not by our feelings or wants.
- As we strive to conform our outward behavior to God’s righteousness, we trust He will transform our inner being so that our thoughts and motivations become more like Christ’s. We cannot suppress our feelings, but we can control their outward expression. The feelings themselves, we leave to God. Some outward forms will be very difficult to build – but we must not stop trying. It is God who makes us truly righteous. Building outward forms of righteousness is a job he enables us to do. He faithfully fills each form with the real thing.
- Is breaking bad habits a losing game for you? Try building outward forms for love, patience, compassion, kindness, humility, and gentleness. God will honor your effort by implanting in your heart the real thing! ***“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”*** (Phil. 1:6).