

Dr. Dan *for* Today

Building Character One Day at a Time

How many times have we said, referring to someone in a complimentary way, “that man or woman has good character.” What is it that we mean when we say that? For me it has to do with a combination of personality traits that I observe and uphold as important, such as honesty, respect, faith, integrity, love, maturity, trust, perseverance, and self-control to mention a few. These are beliefs, values, and convictions that set a person apart from the rest. They are like cream that rises to the top. They embody a different type of person, a different breed, and a cut above the rest. Their disposition is different. The make-up of their mental and emotional qualities distinguishes them differently. I can’t always put my finger on it, but I’m left with a sense of their goodness and a desire to get to know them better. They appear to be a quality person. They seem to have a good footing in life. I think I could trust them. There is more than just an intuitive sense, there is evidence that what the person values and believes is demonstrated in his/her behavior. My grandmother used to say, “the proof is in the pudding.” As wisdom literature states, “you will know them by their fruits.”

Another way of saying this is that the person is one dedicated to results, not just ideas and words. The right outcome is the important objective behind the popular wristband WWJD (What Would Jesus Do). It causes us to stop and think before we act. As the old lady in the Wendy’s commercial used to say, “Where’s the beef?” Such a person is not a caricature of themselves, but rather a genuine person whose life reflects years of good habits and the formulation of important values. Someone once said, “Your ideal is what you wish you were. Your reputation is what people say you are, your character is what you are.” Such a person has a “center” from which they intentionally interact with others and their world. They don’t just reflect who others are and what they do nor are they represented by a fleeting image, they cast a shadow. They have clear internal boundaries regarding who they are and how they will think, feel, and interact. Their legacy is a good and consistent reputation stemming from years of formulating good habits one day at a time.

The process of character building doesn’t happen overnight. It is embodied in this old adage from Charles Reade, “sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.”

Robert Louis Stevenson told the story of a Mohammedan veiled prophet who was a great teacher and light among the people of his day. He wore a veil, he said, because his countenance was so glorious none could bear the sight of his face. But, eventually the veil decayed and fell away revealing nothing but an ugly old man. Stevenson stressed that, however high the truths the preacher taught, and however skillfully he might excuse the blemishes of his character, the time comes when the veil falls away, and a man is seen by people as he really is. How true this is of us as parents and role models. If we have a difficult time controlling our own fleshly desires, how can we expect our children to control theirs? The best form of parental training in character development is to conform our own character first. As the American educator, Horace Mann once described character-forming habits, “habit is a cable; we weave a thread of it every day, and at last we cannot break it.” Benjamin Dejung expressed a similar thought when he said, “the chains of habit are too small to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.” Bad habits are like comfortable beds; easy to get into, but hard to get out of.

The more one finds themselves in situations where they must willfully decide to be trustworthy, honest, respectful, loving, and exhibit self-control the stronger these character or

personality traits become. The stronger they are, the more automatic they also become in differing situations.

In our early years such good habits are learned and reinforced through observing and emulating significant people in our lives. This process is so strong and these individuals have so much influence in the ground laying of character that the saying is true, “bad company corrupts good character” (I Corinthians 15:33). The opposite is true as well; good company reinforces good morals. An important part in character building is being around people with good character. Some of us may differ and debate the definition of good character, but I haven’t heard too many parents, or partners say, “I’m really glad and proud of Bill, or Sue that they hang around friends with police records... or that lie all the time... or that steal... or do drugs...or are having sex.” The list could go on.

Building character happens one day at a time with desired outcomes and consequences in mind. If you want to be honest, you need to be honest in both big and little situations. If you want to be trusted, you need to follow through with what you say you’ll do. If you want to be loving, you need to respond to others with kindness, caring, and compassion, seasoned with forgiveness; in ways that take the other person into account. If you want to have your children exhibit the “fruit of the spirit,” you need to model these in your life and exhibit self-control first. (Galatians Chapter 5).

A person cannot excel beyond the limitations of their character. One builds character one day at a time laying a foundation for their destiny which when fulfilled leaves their legacy. One suggestion I make to parents is read one chapter in either the Psalms, Proverbs, or Ecclesiastes everyday to their children and then pray with them. This “building character one day at a time principle” fortifies our spirits against the pressures of the world to make right choices when temptations come our way. Henry James was once quoted as saying, “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character.”

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