

Faith and the Quest for Character

Back in the 90's I was given a book by Chuck Swindoll called "The Quest for Character" containing short devotionals about God's work on our character in such areas as honesty, integrity, courage, determination, and others. Inspired by that devotional for the rest of the summer we will be going on a similar quest together as we examine God's good work of making our character more like His character.

A Crisis of Character

We just got done studying the importance of faith in the church, and we don't want to forget how vital faith is to the Christian walk— Hebrews 11 says without faith it is impossible to please the Lord— not hard, not difficult, impossible. And just as a healthy, growing faith is vital to the believer, godly character is just as vital because character is all about who we are. Who we really are. Who we are deep inside. Who we are when no one is looking. And sad to say, I believe the church is experiencing a crisis of character today. Let me share a few brief examples.

It's been said *men destroy with their character what they build with their gifts*. Over the past couple years there have been several high profile Christian leaders and pastors who have had to resign in disgrace due to sexual scandals. These failures of character do untold damage to individual lives and to the church's reputation. I think of a well known pastor – if I mentioned his name you would all know him – who I once admired as a great example of having a heart for lost people. Now when I think of him I can't get past the behind the scenes scandals that went on for many years. I couldn't read one of his books now. The truths in the book are still true but I'd be distracted knowing he was living a lie when he wrote the book. *Men destroy with their character what they build with their gifts*.

I believe that Christian marriages are under spiritual attack, and listen, the wear and tear of life is more than enough to create stresses and strains in any marriage even when both spouses sincerely want God's best, but what I've seen time and time again is when one or both spouses refuse to let God deal with their character on a deeper, heart level, that marriage is in really big trouble. *It's sad, but spouses can destroy with their character what they build with their vows*.

Churches can also develop character traits and sad to say some churches can have great events and programs and still be a seedbed of self-righteousness and gossip. Some churches can be downright mean-spirited. If the love of Jesus is in our hearts, how is that even possible? But the truth is *churches can destroy with their character what they build with their programs*.

I could go on with examples but the point is our character is really, really important to the quality of every other area of our lives. And our character is really, really important to God too. Romans 8 says that God's work on our character is the biggest and the best work that He is doing in our lives.

²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* ²⁹ *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

On our quest for character, faith plays a big part. As a bridge from the last series to this series, I've titled this message *Faith and the Quest for Character*. Let's consider three things we should believe about God's work on our character.

1. **Believe that God is working on our character to be like Jesus' character**

The Bible tells us that mankind is created in the image of God. We are God's image-bearers. But sin has marred and distorted God's image in us. It's like when you take a mirror and crack it all up. It still reflects, but the image isn't clear or accurate.

If you aren't a Christian, let me ask you a question. Do you ever feel like something is messed up with this world? You probably do. Have you ever been hurt by someone who you trusted, and it's shaken your trust in people? Do you ever feel like you want to do the right thing but something inside you seems bent on self-destruction and you end up with deep regrets over and over again?

That's what the Bible calls sin. We were created to look like God but sin has distorted His image in us. His image is still there and it comes through sometimes but it's messed up. Jesus came to save us from sin first of all by giving his life on the cross to pay for the debt our sin has incurred, offering us complete forgiveness. When we believe in Jesus we are reconciled as friends of God. And then God begins to work on us restoring His image in us. To conform to Jesus' image is to look like him. God is making us look like Jesus. And that's God's work. Predestined means it was God's plan for us long before we were even born. I can't make me look like Jesus, only God can.

The word character means to engrave upon. In ancient days, letters and numbers were engraved on stone and called *characters*. If you take a coin today, you'll see an image engraved in its surface. On the quarter is the engraved image of our nation's first president, George Washington. His image isn't simply drawn on the surface of the quarter, it's engraved right into the metal alloy.

In the same way, God isn't content with making us look like Jesus on the surface while all kinds of junk is lying just below the surface. God doesn't look on the outward, He sees the heart and that's where He wants to do His work.

This is where faith plays an important part – we need to believe that God sees what people don't. We all can be tempted to try to fix what people see, to tweak our "image" instead of letting God reconstruct our heart. When a church deacon acts all holy in church and then goes home and treats his wife and children unkindly, he's being a hypocrite, yes, but he's also revealing that he doesn't really believe that God is watching him. He cares a lot about what people think but little about what God thinks. There's a problem with his faith!

You know that I love an interesting news story and one caught my eye the other day. It was about a deep secret that a woman kept till her death. After her tragic death the husband found in her private possessions a license for a different person with her face on it. What he found out was that his wife had cut herself off from her family and taken on the identity of a young girl who had died. Then she changed her name again. It took them years to discover her real identity. She lived her whole life as someone she wasn't.

God doesn't want us living our lives as someone we're not. Faith realizes that God sees it all anyway so we can't hide anything from Him. This protects us from deceiving ourselves into thinking that if we're pulling it off in the eyes of people we're pulling it off in the eyes of God. God wants to engrave Jesus' image into our character – into the deepest parts of our heart. Our part is to believe and cooperate with

God's work.

2. Believe that God works all things for the good of our character

Verse 28 is one of the most amazing promises in the Bible. It says that everything that happens in our lives, everything that God allows into our lives, is working towards good. For the Christian even bad things are working to produce good results. Let's read it again.

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

All things. If whatever is happening in your life is included in "all things" then it's working together for your good. But Paul connects that promise with God's good work in our character: *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son...*

The flow of these two verses go like this: *God is working all things for good for those who are called because all who are called are being conformed to Jesus' image.* The ultimate good God is working is to make our character like Jesus.

God uses anything and everything that comes into our lives to work in our heart and character to make us more like Jesus. And that is a good thing. I have found some of the best things come to my heart through some of the worst things. It's weird, but so often that's what God does.

- God uses trials to help us grow in Christlike perseverance
- God uses delays to help us grow in Christlike patience
- God uses denials and disappointments help us grow in Christlike trust
- When someone hurts us God uses it to help us grow in Christlike forgiveness
- When someone hates us God uses it to help us grow in Christlike love

Sometimes the "all things" God allows into your life will press on your pride, hurt your pride. It's God working humility into your character.

Sometimes the "all things" God allows into your life will be someone letting you down. It's God teaching you to love people but not put them on a pedestal. Only Jesus never lets us down.

Sometimes the "all things" God allows into your life might seem more painful than you can bear. The hurting heart is so often a softer heart. Faith allows that pain to open your heart to God's comfort.

This doesn't make hard trials easier, it doesn't turn heartbreaking situations into happy situations; that's not the point of Romans 8:28-29. The point is that through everything that goes on in our lives we can trust and believe that God's hand is at work doing a bigger and better thing and verse 29 specifically says that better thing is in our character. God's priority isn't to make our lives better, His priority is to make us better. Better people. More like Jesus people. And when we get that and believe that, it gives a redemptive purpose to whatever "all things" happens to be going on in our lives.

None of this is automatic. The good God wants to do can be blocked if we harden our hearts to His Spirit. Sanctification – God working holiness into our character – is a cooperative work. God working and us working. Our work is primarily to open our hearts by faith and let God do His work deep in our hearts and

character. When we're walking through things, faith says, "God, what are You doing in this? What do You want to do in my heart?" Faith moves our emphasis away from "why is this happening to me" or what do I need to do to change my situation to "God, use this to change me. Work in my heart. Help me learn the lesson You have for me in this." His purposes, even in bad things, are always good!

3. Believe that God is committed to His good work in you

I know that there are times when all we see is the mess in our lives and the failures and deficiencies of our character and we can lose hope. Change can come so slow and so gradually that we don't even see it and we start to feel like nothing changes. We get discouraged.

If that's you, I want to give you this encouragement this morning: God is committed to you. He's committed to His good work in you. The theological thrust of Romans 8:28-29 isn't about you, it's about God. See a man-centered version of Rom. 8 would read,

We are working as hard as we can to make as many things in our lives as possible work out for good. For God expects us to conform to Jesus' image and we'd better not let Him down!

These verses aren't man-centered. They are gloriously God-centered. God is working all things (only God could work all things together for good!) for those who love Him. God has predestined us – which means God is working from the end product backwards. When I used to landscape, we'd go to a site and I'd just do what I was told, but I had no idea what we were working towards. But the landscape architect knew exactly what the finished product was to look like and everything he did (and had me do) was working towards that final result.

God says, "I want my children to look like My Son, so I'm am going to predestine them – that is, predetermine their destiny – to be conformed to the character of My Son Jesus". It's going to happen because God has predetermined it will happen and nothing ever thwarts God's purposes. God is committed to seeing it happen. We see the same confidence in God's ability to do this in Phil. 1:6

⁶ 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.

He will. He will. He will. God. God. God. Believe that this morning. Don't walk out of here with your head hanging low. Don't leave here this morning focused on your success or failure in bringing this about. Lift your eyes in faith and believe God at His word. God is doing it. Faith looks up with all kinds of hope and expectation and says, God, You've got this. I welcome Your work in me. Do Your good work deep in my heart and I will give You all the praise and glory.

As we start out this quest for character, we'll be looking at different character qualities. And yes, we have a part to play. But mainly that part is to open our hearts by faith, don't cover up the truth, don't hide behind a phony image, but let God work deep in our hearts and character to change us.

And one day, when we see Jesus face to face, whatever work still needs to be done to make us like him will be done in an instant. We will be like him for we will see him face to face. God promises.