

An Introduction to Christian Character Development

Notesheet *with Notes for the Teacher*

By Dave Batty

Becoming a disciple of Jesus is not simply obeying rules. It is much more than simply confessing your sins to God and asking Him to become the Leader of your life. Being a disciple moves from words to actions.

But what kind of actions? We can learn to act and talk like a Christian, but that is not the key to being a true disciple. What God is looking for is a change that goes deep into our heart. It is your choice to make changes on a very superficial level, or deep changes—changes at the heart level.

One of the promises of being a follower of Jesus is that he will give us spiritual gifts which we can use in doing what he has called us to do. We often are impressed with the spiritual gifts other Christians have—in fact, we are often too impressed with these people. We should not be overly impressed with the gifts that other people have. God alone decides who gets which gifts. We don't earn these gifts.

What we should be impressed with when we look at other people is their Christian character—this is their **gift** to God.

A. What is character?

We are not talking about your **personality**.

“Character is the **will** to do what is right, as **God** defines right, regardless of the cost. Men and women of character are willing to recognize there is a standard of right and wrong outside of us that we need to submit ourselves to. We must be proactive and intentional in our pursuit of character and God will use our character to guide us.”

Quote by Andy Stanley

Proverbs 11:1-3 NIV

¹ The LORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight.

² When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

³ The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.

Another definition of character is an absolute system of right and wrong, combined with a will to do what is right.

There are two essential elements of understanding character and how it works in our life.

1. Determining what is right and wrong
2. Choosing (willing) to do what is right

Let's take a closer look at these two essential elements of character.

1. Determining what is right and wrong

If you are going to develop Christian character in your life, then you must build on a set of beliefs based on what **God** says is right and wrong. This requires that you study God's Word to learn what He says is right and wrong.

We also need to carefully assess our own current beliefs. How many of our current beliefs about what is right are based on:

- what our culture says is right
- our family traditions of what is right
- our friends standards of what is right

For some of us, it is not so much what others say is right, we have created our own standards of what is right.

But to develop Godly character in our lives, we must first determine what God says is right and wrong. This standard of right and wrong is not based on my own opinions—it must be based on God's truth.

2. Choosing (willing) to do what is right

Our will has a great part in determining our character. It is not enough to believe something is right. We must choose to make that belief a part of our lifestyle. We must be fully committed to doing the right thing, no matter how hard it may be.

The strength of your character is revealed in the presence of **problems**. How do you respond when you are under pressure? When everything is not going smoothly in your life, how do you respond? You can have a weak character, or a strong character. Your character can be Godly, or very ungodly. Look at your choices and they reveal your character.

B. What are specific examples of Christian character for us to develop?

Activity for individual's personal reflection (not a group activity)

Have the students read over this list of character qualities and pick one or two that they want to develop in a greater way in their life. Then tell them to use this character quality as we work through the rest of this course, looking for ways to apply this in their own life.

One list of character qualities comes from the *Character Qualities Class* in the *Personal Studies for New Christians*.

Alertness	Fairness	Persuasiveness
Attentiveness	Faith	Punctuality
Availability	Flexibility	Responsibility
Cautiousness	Forgiveness	Resourcefulness
Compassion	Generosity	Reverence
Contentment	Gentleness	Security
Courage	Gratefulness	Self-control
Creativity	Hospitality	Sensitivity
Decisiveness	Humility	Sincerity
Deference	Initiative	Thoroughness
Dependability	Joyfulness	Thriftiness
Determination	Love	Tolerance
Diligence	Loyalty	Truthfulness
Discernment	Meekness	Virtue
Discretion	Neatness	Wisdom
Endurance	Obedience	
Enthusiasm	Patience	

Opposite Trait List of Character Qualities

Opposite	Character Quality....	CQ#	Opposite.....	Character Quality	CQ#
Anger	Meekness	11	Prejudice	Tolerance	24
Anxiety	Security	10	Presumption	Faith	8
Apathy.....	Enthusiasm	36	Pride	Humility	35
Callousness	Sensitivity	40	Rashness	Cautiousness	12
Carelessness	Cautiousness	12	Rejection	Forgiveness	6
Condemning	Discernment	26	Resistance.....	Flexibility	44
Contentiousness	Persuasiveness	47	Restlessness	Patience	13
Covetousness	Contentment	3	Rudeness	Deference	32
Cowardice.....	Courage	49	Self pity.....	Joyfulness	25
Deception.....	Truthfulness	1	Self-centeredness.....	Availability	45
Disobedience	Obedience	2	Self-indulgence.....	Self-control	30
Disorganization	Neatness	4	Selfishness	Love	39
Disrespect.....	Reverence	5	Simple-mindedness....	Discretion	29
Double-mindedness....	Decisiveness	41	Sloppiness.....	Neatness	4
Extravagance.....	Thriftiness	20	Slothfulness.....	Diligence	28
Faintheartedness	Determination	15	Stinginess.....	Generosity	34
Fearfulness	Courage	49	Tardiness.....	Punctuality	16
Giving up.....	Endurance	31	Unawareness.....	Alertness	19
Harshness.....	Gentleness	48	Unconcern	Attentiveness	9
Hypocrisy	Sincerity	33	Underachievement	Creativity	38
Impurity	Virtue	22	Unfaithfulness.....	Loyalty	17
Incompleteness.....	Thoroughness	42	Unhappiness.....	Contentment	3
Inconsistency	Dependability	14	Unreliability	Responsibility	21
Indifference	Compassion	18	Unresponsiveness	Initiative	37
Judging	Discernment	26	Unthankfulness.....	Gratefulness	7
Loneliness.....	Hospitality	46	Wastefulness	Resourcefulness	43
Natural inclinations	Wisdom	27	Willfulness	Obedience	2
Partiality	Fairness	23			

(from *Character Qualities Class*, Student Manual)

C. How does a person develop their character?

There are some who believe that your character is formed very early in life.

“Your character is the sum total of all your habits.” Quote by Rick Warren in *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Rick Warren has identified a key part in how we develop our character. Simply look at your habits. Our habits reveal our choices—daily choices.

If our character is the sum total of our habits, does this mean we can change our character?

The answer to this question comes to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. Even more important is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

2 Corinthians 5:17 New Living Translation

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

We become spiritually alive when we become a believer in Christ. But becoming a **disciple**—a follower of Jesus—is where the real opportunity lies to change our character. Being a disciple is all about how we live. This is where we either make superficial changes in our lifestyle, or radical changes—changes at the heart level.

The Bible is filled with scriptures that make it clear that we can choose to become a different person than we were before we started to follow Jesus. It comes back to the definition of character. Do we take the time to do a deep evaluation of our beliefs of right and wrong? Do we then begin to make changes—motivated from a heart to follow Jesus?

Hebrews 5:11-14 New Living Translation

There is much more we would like to say about this, but it is difficult to explain, especially since you are spiritually dull and don't seem to listen.¹² You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food.¹³ For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right.¹⁴ Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong.

God wants us to use our character to **direct** us in our responses to every situation we face each day. We honor God when we use His truth as the standard for our decisions on a daily basis.

D. In developing Christian disciples, we need to give high priority to helping our students develop Christian character in their lives.

Most of our students did not arrive at Teen Challenge with Christian character as their strength. Godly character formation does not happen by chance, or by just being present in Teen Challenge.

Small Group Activity: (5 minutes)

Have the students identify an example from the life of Jesus when he helped his disciples or someone else in developing character in their lives.

- How did Jesus teach or mentor them?
- What did he do to encourage them to develop a particular character quality in their life?

Here are some scriptures which they can use for this small group activity. You can have them look at the list of character qualities on page 3 of these notes and identify which character qualities Jesus demonstrated in his own life, and also how did his teachings focus on a particular character quality?

There may be several character qualities that relate to each story, and to the different individuals who are part of the story.

You may want to take the class as a whole group through one of these (#6 for example) and have them identify which character qualities relate to this story. Then assign each small group a different story to evaluate.

After they have had their small group discussion, have them report their findings to the whole class.

1. John 8:1-8 Jesus talking to the men and the woman they brought caught in the act of adultery.
2. Luke 10:25-37 The Good Samaritan parable
3. Luke 7:36-50 Jesus anointed by a sinful woman in Simon's home
4. John 13:1-17 Jesus washes the feet of his disciples
5. Luke 13:10-17 Jesus heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath
6. Luke 21:1-4 The offering of the widow
7. Luke 22:24-30 Disciples argue over who is the greatest

There may be other stories from the life of Christ that you want to use. The above are only a few examples of what you can use for this activity.

1. Character formation takes place because of a very intentional process where we seek to put out of our lives ungodly character traits and plant and grow godly character traits.

2. As a discipler, we must first model Christian character in our lives 24-7.

For example—it is a problem when a staff lacks self control. The students complain about the staff:

- driving
- lack of honesty
- anger
- conflict management
- jumping to conclusions before having the facts
- harsh talk toward the students

How do we teach character development?

- not simply preaching
- not simply teaching
- not simply counseling

3. Developing Christian character starts in our mind.

We must choose to think the right thoughts.

Thoughts >>>> Actions >>>> Attitudes >>>>> Character

Right thoughts lead to right actions. Right actions lead to right attitudes. Right attitudes, applied consistently over time produce Godly character.

4. Character is developed one small step at a time, especially as I face problems in my daily activities.

How did Jesus help his disciples develop Christian character in their lives?

Character is not developed by a single prayer or action. It is developed through a consistent application of biblical principles. It comes from a heart of conviction and commitment. I am choosing this response because it is what I want from deep in my heart. **My character is who I am at the very depths of my soul.**

E. How do we take these from simply being “an assignment” to becoming part of our whole lifestyle?

This following character quality is given as an example of what is available in the PSNC Character Qualities Class Student Manual.

13. Patience (from *Character Qualities Class*, Student Manual)

Opposite Quality — Restlessness

PATIENCE — Learning how to wait to fulfill personal goals. Increasing the time you can wait between achievement and reward. Learning to accept difficult situations as from God without giving Him a deadline to remove them.

1. Do you buy things before you have the money to pay for them?
2. Is your primary concern to remove a problem or to see God’s purpose in allowing it to exist in the first place?
3. Do those around you avoid you when you are going through a difficult situation?
4. Are projects more important to you than people?

5. Do you experience inward pressure when your plans don't work out?
6. Are you willing to go through the training and experience required to become more proficient in your responsibilities?

Romans 5:3-4 The Living Bible

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials for we know that they are good for us—they help us learn to be patient. ⁴ And patience develops strength of character in us and helps us trust God more each time we use it until finally our hope and faith are strong and steady.