
How This Study Supports the Discipleship Plan (see page 129).

OBEY GOD AND DENY SELF. A key marker of a Christian is obedience to God and His Word. God's Word calls us to bring our lives into conformity with who Christ is. We are to be like Christ, so we must bring our character, lifestyle, and habits into conformity with His.

CHARACTER COUNTS

Session 1 The Importance of Character • 2 Peter 1:1-11

Session 2 Godliness • 1 Timothy 4:6-16

Session 3 Humility • Philippians 2:1-11

Session 4 Contentment • Philippians 4:10-20

Session 5 Generosity • 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

Session 6 Integrity • 1 Peter 3:8-17

INTRODUCTION

CHARACTER COUNTS

Have you ever noticed that we are called human beings, not human doers? Here's why: What we do is an expression of who we are. And there's a word used to describe who we are. *Character*.

When someone describes another person by their positive traits, such as kind or generous, or by their negative traits, such as mean or hypocritical, these are characteristics, a description of who they are as a person at the most fundamental level. That's character.

The basic message of this study is that character is a big deal. Character counts.

Most of the influence we have on other people related to our faith is due to our character.

Whether we have integrity, or show generosity, or are humble and at peace with ourselves, determines how others are influenced, either toward Christ or away from Him. Because these qualities are characteristic of Jesus Himself.

The passages we will be studying will help you answer the question: "What am I going to do with myself?" They won't merely recite for you all the things you should be but will also point to the reasons why your character counts.

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Session 1



The Importance of Character

THE POINT

God equips us for Christlike character.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

A phrase you hear a lot these days is, “Fake it until you make it.” Of course, the idea is that you should act as if something is true and then eventually it becomes true. But is that really the case?

Anna Sorokin pretended to be a wealthy German heiress, defrauding people and financial institutions for more than \$200,000. For a while, it seemed that she had it made. But her crimes were prosecuted, and she went to jail. Pretending to be someone she wasn’t didn’t create anything new. In the end, her character was simply exposed.

Pretending to be a certain kind of person only delays truly becoming that person. But can we lay aside the charade and become who we would like to be?

Character is how we describe who we really are.

An ancient letter written to some believers in Christ affirms that what is needed for a character makeover is available to those who believe. While it takes some effort on our part to experience deep change, it brings lasting benefits.

QUESTION 1:

Who are some positive role models in our culture today?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

2 PETER 1:1-3

¹ Simeon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ: To those who have received a faith equal to ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ. ² May grace and peace be multiplied to you through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. ³ His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

One of the earliest followers of Jesus during His earthly ministry was Peter, the author of two books in the New Testament bearing his name. He was unpredictable, at times rising to the occasion with spiritual understanding, then turning right around and failing to grasp even the most basic truth about Jesus.

Here's an example of what I'm talking about. Peter believed he was above ever being disloyal to Jesus even though others might be (Matt. 26:33). However, after stating boldly that he would never betray Jesus, within hours he denied Jesus and declared he never knew Him (vv. 69-75).

It was a very visible and public failing for Peter. His character had been exposed at a key moment in his spiritual pilgrimage. And yet he became a key leader in the early church. How was that even possible?

The words he wrote to other believers in the book of 2 Peter begin with a clear affirmation that no superstars exist in the church founded by Jesus. Peter knew that the faith of those to whom he was writing was equal to his own. Sure, he was an apostle and someone who had

seen Christ face-to-face. But that was all made possible by Jesus Himself.

Clearly Peter had grown in his character. The gospels depict Peter as the impetuous spokesman of the early disciples. Once confident of his superiority over others, he came to see that as everyone stood before Jesus, the ground there was surprisingly level. This kind of humility is a mark of Christ-like character. In fact, we never grow in character without it.

So partly out of his own experience but confirmed by God's revelation, Peter knew that growth in character was possible. Believing this is very important. When you really think about it, there's a lot of cynicism about the possibility of changes in character. The leopard can't change his spots (Jer. 13:23). Once a liar, always a liar, or so says the prevailing opinion.

Another myth about the possibility of change goes like this: "Well, yes, some people do change. But not me. I don't have what it takes to become a different kind of person."

Sorry but also not true.

Peter wrote that it was God's power given to us that makes a change in character possible. In addition to that, this empowerment is complete. In verse 3, an amazing statement is made: "His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness."

So, once we accept the premise that this type of transformation is possible, then we begin to wonder how it happens. *Yes, I want to change. How do I do that?*

Of course, knowledge is involved. But we're not talking about mere information. There's an old saying about making it in life: "It's not what we know but who we know." It all starts with knowing Jesus. Becoming someone different involves knowledge of God and His Son. Knowing the Bible is important. It points us to Jesus.

A genuine renewal of character isn't something we're guilt tripped into. It's something we're

called into. The greatness and goodness of Jesus drew Peter toward a transformed character. He came to realize that Jesus was so much better than he was (Luke 5:1-11). But it also dawned on Peter that this teacher from Nazareth had the power to change his life.

That's why he wrote to those early believers and assured them God had given them everything they needed to grow in Christlike character. And nothing has changed about that. The same is true for us.

QUESTION 2:

How does it change your outlook if you realize you've been given everything you need to live a godly life?

2 PETER 1:4-8

⁴ By these he has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire. ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, ⁶ knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, ⁷ godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being useless or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Yes, it's true that God gives us everything we need to become like Him, but the process is hardly automatic.

It begins with God's promises to us, statements in the Bible about what He will do and what is always true. As we cling to what God has affirmed, we can "share in the divine nature"

(v.4). In other words, we can grow in godliness. We can grow in our character.

We need this growth because we live in a world of corruption. It didn't start out that way; God made a perfect world. But things went bad after sin entered the picture.

While the world around us isn't helping us grow in character, it isn't the only impediment. Peter reminded his readers that there's corruption in the world but there's also evil desire in us.

The word for "evil desire" is just one word in the original language used by Peter. It literally means "over desire," a desire that goes too far. We find something that we enjoy, such as a hobby or a friendship. Nothing wrong there. But we can go too far with it, and it becomes an obsession. Many character flaws are due to excessive desires. Even good things become bad when we love them more than anything else, including God.

Peter set the stage for his readers to think about what they needed to do. They would be required to exercise diligence ("make every effort," v. 5) in their character growth. Think of the growth God desires us to experience in our lives as a "virtue catalog" built on faith in Jesus. Here are the entries:

- **Goodness.** Good character has a magnetic quality to it. We are drawn to people who are truly good.
- **Knowledge.** A desire to pursue goodness is stimulated by understanding.
- **Self-control.** People of character are called (v. 3), not driven. Discipline is internal.
- **Endurance.** All attempts at personal spiritual growth will meet with resistance. When we fail, we must begin again.
- **Godliness.** A person can attempt to grow in character for selfish reasons or out of a desire to impress others. True godliness points to Jesus.

- **Brotherly affection.** True growth doesn't take place in a vacuum or in an ivory tower. It always transforms relationships with others.
- **Love.** My affection and adoration of God increases if I'm experiencing true personal transformation.

QUESTION 3:

Which of these means of supplementing our faith do you find most challenging?

But these qualities aren't ends in themselves. Instead, they make us useful in God's kingdom. Look at each one of the qualities that Peter encouraged his readers to pursue. Imagine how each one could be utilized in God's kingdom.

A winsome goodness being lived out in a community can be used by God to break down the strongest of objections to the gospel. Restraint in the face of ridicule and rejection may draw a coworker to consider the claims of Christ. Welcoming a new neighbor like a long-lost sibling may bring timely consolation to someone who now lives several time-zones away from family. Grow in your character and you may find God using you in some surprising ways.

QUESTION 4:

When it comes to growth in character, how can we balance reliance on God with diligent effort?

Engage

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTER

For each of the Christlike character qualities below, write how increasing progress in this quality might make you more useful in God's kingdom.

Goodness:

Knowledge:

Self-control:

Endurance:

Godliness:

Brotherly affection:

Love:

2 PETER 1:9-11

⁹ The person who lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten the cleansing from his past sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election, because if you do these things you will never stumble. ¹¹ For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

In Peter's era, the churches he ministered to were plagued by false teachers. But it wasn't just a leadership issue. Even at the most basic entry level, congregations had to sort through whose faith was genuine. So, the aged apostle used an important word in verse 10: "confirm."

Some professing believers at the time of the writing of 2 Peter weren't growing in their faith. Their experience of God's grace wasn't real to them. Peter described it as a failure of memory, the opposite of what it means to remember. Spiritual realities must be brought back into the center of our spiritual life.

What confirms a person's faith as genuine? First, making progress in personal character development is a sign of true faith. Knowing Christ brings transformation to our character.

A second way to know that faith is legitimate is a future-oriented perspective. When Christ changes me, I begin to think in terms of the next life and the age to come, not just the present.

The third sure sign of genuine faith is the awareness of divine forgiveness. There's something about being given a second chance that energizes our hunger for character change. It creates a desire to be a better person, not to gain God's favor but because He has already granted it.

Finding assurance of transformation requires us to "make every effort" (v. 10). It goes beyond saying the right things. Like most adults, I know that I need to lose some weight. I'll say it out loud. But the real test of my resolve is revealed in the pursuit of healthy eating and exercise.

One more thing to note about character as confirmation. In practicing the qualities listed in verses 5 through 7, we protect ourselves from stumbling spiritually. Peter made it clear that if you practice the attributes of Christlike character, if you strive to affirm you belong to God's family, "you will never stumble" (v. 10).

Confirmation of our faith is found in godly character. As we grow in these qualities, we verify our possession of true faith. The great news in all of this is that we don't have to pretend to possess the qualities of character. It's about progress, not perfection. We can be confident that the qualities which Peter called for can be authentically found in us.

QUESTION 5:

How can our group help one another confirm our calling and develop godly character?

LIVE IT OUT

If character matters so much and God has equipped us for growth in it, how does that actually come to pass? Choose one of the following applications.

- **Determine.** Before anything else, decide if you really believe that a change of character is possible. Don't give verbal assent to something you're not quite ready to accept as possible.
- **Develop.** Examine the virtue catalog in 2 Peter 1:5-7. Pick one quality on which you would be willing to work. Come up with an action plan to grow in that area. After you've made progress there, select a second one and do the same.
- **Dialogue.** Have a conversation with someone close to you. Consider someone who doesn't have anything to lose by telling you the truth. Ask them to identify your character flaws.


