



IMAGE vs. CHARACTER



Warm Up

- » What is your favorite reality TV show? Why are people so fascinated with reality TV?
- » Why does society focus more on image than character?
- » How would you define “good” and “bad” character?

Study

1. // WHAT IS CHARACTER?

Character is the moral foundation of our life. While “image” is what we present to others, “character” is who we really are. H. Jackson Brown, Jr. says, “Our character is what we do when we think no one is looking.”

Essentially “good” character is about being selfless. It is measured in our respect and concern for others, even when there is no personal benefit.

Philippians 2:3 “Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves.”

2. // WHY IS CHARACTER SO IMPORTANT?

Character determines our success in life. John Maxwell describes it this way: “Ability may get you to the top, but character will keep you there.”

The Great Wall of China is one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Yet in spite of its great size and strength, China was successfully invaded three times in the first 100 years after its completion. How? Each time the enemy simply bribed the guards. We too can focus on the exterior of our lives and fail to address the quality of our hearts.

3. // HOW GOOD IS OUR CHARACTER?

The reality is that we are all lacking in moral character.

Romans 3:10 “There is no one righteous, not even one.”

Reality TV shows try to capture how ordinary people live their lives. But imagine a show that videotaped the thoughts and intentions of our hearts... without editing! It is hard to imagine being proud of all that would be displayed.

4. // HOW DO WE CHANGE OUR CHARACTER?

A change of character requires two things:

Caring about others. Many people live with a “that’s not my problem” mindset. Yet our character grows when we personally concern ourselves with the well being of others. Woodrow Wilson captures the point by saying: “If you think about what you should do for others your character will take care of itself.”

Jesus Christ is our model for this attitude:

“Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:28

Being securely loved. Without the confidence that we are personally loved and protected, we will always hide behind image and avoid the risk of caring for others.

“We love because God first loved us.” 1 John 4:19

As well, without being unconditionally loved first, our care for others will always have mixed motives — do we love others for their benefit or ours? When we are certain of God’s love for us, we can be genuine, self-giving people.

Personal Application

Our moral decisions are typically motivated by mixed motives — partly by external image and partly by internal character.

- » What would increase the level of internal character in your life?
- » Can we ever get beyond selfishness?

Prayer

- » What can we pray for in your life?



CONTROL



Warm Up

- » On a scale of 1-10, how much of a neat-freak are you?
- » When do you feel the most in control of your life?

Study

1. //MANAGING CHAOS

Soon after hurricane Katrina hit America's southern seaboard in 2005, the headlines read, "Chaos in New Orleans." But that chaos is not referring to the natural catastrophe, but to the human response: snipers, rape, murder, riots, looting and suicide. A level of order had to be established just to bring in the much needed help.

Whether we use military force in the extreme case of New Orleans, or if we buy a Blackberry to organize our schedule, the obvious response to chaos is to take control.

This is how people manage fear in general. If we are afraid of physical harm, we buy a gun. If we are afraid of the unknown, we seek knowledge. If we are afraid of rejection, we build relational boundaries. Control is our way of managing.

But there is a limit to when control is helpful, because taken to its extreme, control blocks out love and joy as well. For instance, if I successfully protect myself from every possibility of being rejected, I shut out love. Or, if I perfectly manage every minute of my time, I have no fun. Perfectionistic control leads us to a lonely, sterile place.

2. //WHO IS IN CONTROL?

Not only does the need for control isolate us, it simply does not work over time. We can never totally erase weakness, ignorance or unpredictability from our lives. So how do we find peace and joy in the midst of uncertainty and imperfection? Through trusting the One who is in control — God.

Therefore, our pursuit of control becomes unhealthy at the point when it challenges God. In the Bible, a man named Job experienced a series of catastrophes: losing his business, his children and his health. In his anger he challenged God's motives and power. God's reply was this:

Job 38:4; 40:2 "Where were you when I laid the foundations for the earth? You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?"

God's response is that it is one thing to be a critic, it is quite another to have an answer.

3. //CHOOSING TRUST

How then do we move towards a life free of fear and full of joy? By trusting in the One who is able to give us safety and love even when we are out of control.

Romans 8:38 "I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life... neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow."

The challenge is that we hate to give up control. Nevertheless, it is only when we give up control and express our need of God that we find the joy and freedom we seek.

Mark 2:17 "Healthy people don't need a doctor — sick people do. I have not come to call those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners." ~ Jesus

Personal Application

- » Why do people struggle with admitting their needs?
- » Why can't our control deliver us from all our fears?
- » Is there an area in which you struggle with giving up control? Why?

Prayer

- » What can we pray for in your life?



FEAR



Warm Up

- » How would you do on the show, Fear Factor?
- » How do you respond to fearful events?
- » Woody Allen remarks, "It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens." Why are people afraid of death?

Study

INTRODUCTION

We have a love/hate relationship with fear. We laugh at fear, yet wear seatbelts. We enjoy scary movies, yet suffer from anxiety. We are considered wise to respect fear, yet are admired for conquering it. Fear sends us running in all directions, yet it never leaves our side.

1.//WHAT IS FEAR?

Fear is a response to power. We are afraid of those things that have the power to harm us, physically or internally. We fear what can hurt us, punish us, fail or fire us.

1 John 4:18 "Fear has to do with punishment."

Fear is a response to evil. When evil is present, especially if it is powerful, we fear for our well-being.

Proverbs 28:12 "When the wicked rise to power, men go into hiding."

2.//HOW DO WE CONQUER FEAR?

Power. A specific fear can only be defeated with a corresponding greater power.

For instance, the power of weapons combats our fear of physical harm; the power of truth defeats our fear of monsters; the power of goodness answers our fear of punishment.

Love. Power alone is insufficient to calm our fears; we must know that the one with power is also kind.

1 John 4:18 "Perfect love drives out fear."

Love drives out fear because it is only evil that hurts us. The absence of evil is the presence of safety.

The ideal scenario is to trust in someone who has both ultimate power and perfect love. This is exactly who God is:

Psalm 62:11-12 "Power, O God, belongs to you; and unfailing love, O Lord, is yours."

When we respect God's power and trust in His kindness, we discover a fearlessness that is not bravado; for it is based on His divine power and love.

Oswald Chambers describes the benefit of fearing God: "The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else."

Proverbs 19:23 "Fear of the Lord leads to life, bringing security and protection from harm."

CONCLUSION

Maurice Freehill asks, "Who is more foolish, the child afraid of the dark or the man afraid of the light?" Why would people be afraid of God's light?

John 3:20-21 "Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light."

It is not just the evil around us, but also the evil inside us that creates fear. When we do evil, we fear punishment. But when we live by God's truth, we stand on the right side of His power.

Personal Application

- » Is there an evil inside of you that you are afraid of?
- » How can God's love and power deliver you from fear?

Prayer

- » What can we pray for in your life?



RELATIONSHIPS



Warm Up

In the movie, *City Slickers*, Billy Crystal and "Jack" are talking about what is important in life. Jack holds up his index finger and says, "Do you know what the secret of life is? One thing. Find that one thing and stick to it, and everything else will work out." Crystal responds, "But what is that one thing?" Jack replies, "That is what you have to find out."

- » What would you consider is the most important thing to you?
- » What role should relationships play in our lives?
- » What is a relationship you really admire? Why?

Study

INTRODUCTION

Whether it is through marriage, a sports team, internet chat rooms, dating relationships or clubbing on the weekend, people are seeking relationship. One would think with all the options available to us that our hunger would be satisfied, yet the incidence of heart-break and loneliness is epidemic:

40% divorce rate, up 10,603% in a 66 year span. 1:4 girls and 1:6 boys are sexually abused in our city. 2nd leading cause of death in teenagers is suicide. 80% divorce rate if married couples lived together first versus 3% among those who were virgins. Common-law relationships are 62 times more violent than marriages. Four faulty assumptions make relational satisfaction elusive.

ASSUMPTION 1// "We can't love others until we love ourselves."

It is generally assumed that self-love leads to the love of others. Yet how can selfishness lead to selflessness?

2 Timothy 3:1-2 "In the last days there will be many troubles, because people will love themselves, they will not love others".

ASSUMPTION 2// "I don't need love."

Whether it is turning to disposable relationships, independence, or "things," the belief is that intimate relationships are too risky, too complicated or simply not necessary. Self-sufficiency is never a replacement for loving relationships.

ASSUMPTION 3// "We fall in love."

It is common to view love as an emotion, so when the emotion goes, so does love. But love is first a motive, where we care about others more than self.

1 Corinthians 13:4-5 "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged."

Truly satisfying relationships require loving action. As Dr. Buscaglia says, "I have a very strong feeling that the opposite of love is not hate — it's apathy."

ASSUMPTION 4// "God has nothing to do with relational happiness."

This assumption is faulty for two reasons. First, our personal ability to love is lacking. Only God can provide the love we need to experience relational peace and joy.

1 John 4:7 "Love comes from God."

Second, nothing can replace a personal relationship with God.

Romans 1:25 "They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshipped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself."

Relationships crumble under the burden of expectations when we try to find in a human what only God can give.

CONCLUSION

The quality of our lives is determined by the quality of our relationships. Therefore, the purpose of life is found in loving God and others, for without love, life is meaningless.

Personal Application

- » Which of the four faulty assumptions can you most identify with?
- » Which relationship in your life do you think needs the most work: your relationship with God, family, friends, or the opposite sex?
- » What would enhance your relational satisfaction?

Prayer

- » What can we pray for in your life?



SECURITY



Warm Up

- » What brought you security as a child? (Blanket, etc.)
- » Why don't these things bring adults security?
- » Many people appear secure, but what does it mean to be truly secure?

Study

1 // WHAT IS SECURITY?

Shakespeare says, "Security is the chief enemy of mortals." As "mortals" we long for security yet live in a fragile state of existence; caught in both present and eternal realities that we can't control.

Security is being "unconditionally loved and protected." We all want to be loved and understood, valued and protected, just the way we are.

Proverbs 19:22 "What a man desires is unfailing love."

2 // WHERE CAN WE FIND SECURITY?

While many work hard at ignoring their need for security, a greater difficulty comes in satisfying this need. Where can we turn?

God — by definition, God suffers from none of our limitations.

Isaiah 40:28 "The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth. He never grows weak or weary. No one can measure the depths of his understanding."

God is eternal, so we are safe even after we die. He is all-powerful, so we are protected from evil powers. He is all-knowing, so we are no longer in danger from ignorance. God is also all-loving, meaning that nothing, not even our performance, can undermine the security found in Him.

"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8

People — typically our default source of security is either in others or ourselves. But we remain insecure for we are:

Powerless. Simply put, we aren't in control; so even our best efforts leave us vulnerable.

Sinful. The evil in our hearts makes even our self-love untrustworthy — we hurt ourselves all the time.

Ignorant. How can we know for certain what is best for us? The truth is, we are mostly guessing.

Things — we can seek security in a diversity of things: deadbolts, health, money, jobs, pets, abilities and Volvos.

But like a child's security blanket, they can only provide an illusion of security: they can't protect our souls, they can't give us the love we require, nor can they make unconditional guarantees.

CONCLUSION

Without God, our security is in teddy bears — well meaning perhaps, but ineffective. For this reason life becomes a never-ending pursuit of affection and protection. No wonder so many people live with uncertainty, loneliness, fear, guilt and rejection; for they are trying to build their security upon some thing or some one other than God.

With God, our security transcends every circumstance, human fault or limitation. As one author said, "Security is not the absence of danger, but the presence of God, no matter what the danger."

Romans 8:38-39 "I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow... indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Personal Application

- » To which source of security have you chiefly turned: self, other people, things or God?
- » What will increase the love and protection you have?

Prayer

- » What can we pray for in your life?



SIGNIFICANCE



Warm Up

- » As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?
- » As an adult, what do you now classify as truly “important things”?

Study

INTRODUCTION

Why am I here? Does my life matter? From heroic deeds to scientific achievements, from suicide to success at all costs, the cause of man's greatest triumphs and tragedies are driven by the universal need for significance. Myles Munroe concludes, “The deepest craving of the human spirit is to find a sense of significance and relevance. This search becomes the ultimate pursuit of man.” So how do we become significant? We need to be three things:

1. // PURPOSE-DRIVEN

Mary O'Connor quips, “It's not so much how busy you are, but why you are busy. The bee is praised. The mosquito is swatted.” The point is that significance is not the result of busyness, but of doing what is meaningful.

Without a valuable purpose, this suicide note captures our existence: “I am tired of buttoning and unbuttoning.” We need to do things that truly matter.

2. // OTHER-CENTERED

Our value is not measured by our personal accomplishments or titles. Our life matters when it benefits others. A hero is always defined by selfless acts. The inverse is also true; those who live for self, close the door on significance.

1 Corinthians 13:3 “No matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.”

3. // CREATOR-DEFINED

The created always finds its meaning from its creator. This is especially true for humanity. Even the noted atheist, Bertrand Russell admits, “Unless you assume a God, the question of life's purpose is meaningless.”

In fact, if we don't know what something was made for, we tend to misuse or abuse it. So rather than guess at the purpose of our existence, we can ask our Creator.

Jeremiah 1:5 “Before I made you in your mother's womb, I chose you. Before you were born, I set you apart for a special work.”

CONCLUSION

So the question is not, does my life matter? God designed our life to matter. The only question is whether we will do what matters. When we do what matters, we find meaning, clarity, simplicity, and joy... not only in this life, but for eternity. Listen to what God designed us to do:

Micah 6:8 “The Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

But recognize that true importance comes by accepting true responsibilities; and the greater our responsibilities, the greater the consequences for falling short. This is especially true in the responsibilities God gave us.

Romans 2:6-8 “[God] will judge everyone according to what they have done. He will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good... But he will pour out his wrath and anger on those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth and instead live lives of wickedness.”

The responsibilities God has given people are not too hard, but they are important. How we respond to his requirements determines our eternal destiny.

Personal Application

- » Why might people choose to live a life of distraction or busyness?
- » Sometimes children don't like listening to their parents. Like them, why might we resent God for giving us responsibilities? But why is it good to listen to our “Heavenly Father”?
- » What must you do to embrace your life purpose? What must you give up?

Prayer

- » What can we pray for in your life?



TRUTH



Warm Up

- » Honesty is a high value, so why do we still tell “white lies” or deceive others?
- » Is there a difference between facts and truth?
- » All religions claim to be the truth. How do you decide which one to believe?

Study

1. // IS TRUTH RELATIVE OR ABSOLUTE?

By definition truth is “a verified or indisputable fact.” The earth’s gravity is always true. Historical events either happened or they didn’t. Human life always has value. God exists regardless of what we think. Ever-widening circles of possibilities do not change the fact that there is a bull’s-eye.

While truth itself is free from human limitations or distortions, our ability to understand the truth is not.

2. // WHAT BLINDS US FROM SEEING THE TRUTH?

The Bible describes some people as “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). Why is this so?

Scoffing. Cynicism and unbelief blind us from the truth.

Proverbs 14:6 “A scoffer seeks wisdom and finds none.”

Self-sufficiency. Pride and denial cloud our need for truth.

Revelation 3:17 “You say, ‘I am rich; I have everything I want. I don’t need a thing!’ And you don’t realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.”

Sin. Our sinful desires and actions cause us to twist the truth.

Romans 1:18, 20 “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against... men who suppress the truth by their wickedness... For God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Satan. We have a spiritual enemy who deceives us.

2 Corinthians 4:4 “Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don’t believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News.”

3. // WHERE IS THE SOURCE OF ABSOLUTE TRUTH?

While many people or philosophies might know some true things, humans can only discover truth; they are not its source. But since Jesus is God, He does not just know the truth, He is the truth.

“Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’”
John 14:6.

As God, Jesus suffers from none of our problems: His heart is pure, His knowledge infinite, and His ability unlimited.

“God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind.” Numbers 23:19

“‘My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,’ says the Lord. ‘And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.’” Isaiah 55:8-9

We need God to show us the truth; for we don’t even know what we don’t know!

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” Proverbs 16:25

CONCLUSION

Our ignorance won’t change what is true. So fortunately, God gave us the Bible to tell us the truth and how he expects us to live.

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives.” 2 Timothy 3:16

Without the Bible, we are lost in a sea of human opinions. With the Bible, we have an objective means of discovering the truth.

Personal Application

- » Why is the Divine authorship of the Bible so hotly debated?
- » How do we seek truth in spite of our human biases and limitations?
- » How would knowing the truth help you personally?

Prayer

- » What can we pray for in your life?