

The Christian's Character

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Intro:

I would like to present to you some thoughts I had concerning the final things written by Paul to us as believers. It is my hope that we as believers will come to see Paul's guidelines for living in a different way, and seek these things in our present lives.

In this study I'd like to discuss the character of the Christian. This is a subject that is not often approached, perhaps because in so doing it becomes clear what things are lacking in the character of the speaker. A person's character has to do with their innermost thoughts and motivations, not clearly seen by others. It is the area in our lives that has to do with that secret walk that the believer has with his Lord. I can see what you do; I cannot see what you think!

The handmaiden of character is virtue, which means conformity to do what is right. It is something which lacks in all of us. In my observations of those who profess Christ, it seems that many times there is a great deal of time spent in keeping oneself pure from the world, yet little effort is spent in the innermost realms of virtue. Often I catch myself speaking with malice towards another, or saying something that did little to edify them. Brethren, these things are not right; they do not display the true character of our Lord! It is for these reasons that I hope to impart to you some thoughts on this subject. The Lord

has provided examples regarding this area of our lives, where we should all seek improvement.

I. Paul our advisor on Christian living

It is my observation that in modern Christendom, very little is taught concerning the manifestation of Christ in the character of the believer. Many of us allow things to occur within our character that do not reflect the new nature we have received as believers in Christ. Many claim to be devoted followers of Christ, yet know very little about the teachings of the one man called to be our example in the Christian walk.

In this passage in Philippians chapter 4 we are told about a truth that many of us seem to have forgotten.

Philippians 4: 9 “Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace will be with you.”

In this verse, which is one of several of this nature in the writings of this Apostle, these believers are told certain things concerning the relationship Paul had with them and with all believers who have learned from him. He reminds them that they not only heard the truth from him, they received it and saw what he taught active within his own life. He calls himself forth as an example of a man who has known the presence of the God of peace. He tells them, and us, that he is the example given to them, so that they may also understand the presence of the peace of God.

Philippians 4:7 “And the peace of God, which passeth understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

I believe that we as believers today look at the writings of Paul in a different way than those who received them directly. I understand that many of the letters that Paul wrote were passed between the different assemblies of believers, but those people never had them all within a single volume of a book! We have the ability to learn the truth in a progressive manner, as Paul learned it over a period of time. Today, we as believers can read through the letters of Paul in the order in which they were written, and through the study of them, see how he progressively came to understand the truth that we hold.

The believer would know very little concerning a walk of faith if it were not for Paul and the recording of the revelation he received from the Lord! If there ever was a man that would be qualified as an advisor on a close personal walk with Christ, it is Paul!

A. Paul the aged

It is important when considering the role of Paul as an advisor for the Christian life of faith, that we remember the order in which his books were written. We must divide them into those written before the end of Acts and those written after the book of Acts. Many believers fail to realize the importance of God’s pronouncement of judgment upon the nation of Israel in Acts chapter 28. Failure to do this results in a misunderstanding of the

revelation given to Paul. The books written during the Acts period are: I and II Thessalonians, I and II Corinthians, Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. The books written after the close of the Acts period are: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon, Titus and I and II Timothy. This is important not only in the understanding of doctrine, but also in catching a glimpse into the character of this man who was used by God.

Paul's doctrine could be seen in his life. Philippians 3:17a & 4:9

"Brethren, be followers together of me,... Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me do: and the God of peace shall be with you."

Paul was one of the few men who lived the closest to what he professed to believe! Honestly, this is a problem that we all have. I mean actually living what we believe! In the believer's walk of faith we are to be obedient to the teaching (doctrine) that we have come to understand; yet we often fail to live what we profess! Paul, being aware of this same problem in his own life of faith, tells us how to deal with our feelings of inadequacies. That is: not to dwell upon past defeats in our Christian walk, but to stretch or reach forward, constantly being aware of what is ours, the righteousness of faith. (Phil. 3:9) It is the constant work of the believer to earnestly strive for (to press toward) the mark of perfection, which is our calling as believers.

Paul's character changed over the years of his life as he walked with the Lord. This may be seen reflected in his impatience; evident in his earlier ministry. Before conversion, I believe that Paul (as Saul) was a very impatient and proud man. This is evident to me in Acts 9:1. After the conversion of Paul, I believe patience and humility were the virtues that were the hardest for Paul to learn. This can be seen in his impatience while seeking deliverance from his thorn in the flesh (II Corinthians chapter 12) and in his searching for the answer to his struggles with his old nature, in Romans chapter 7. What Paul writes in II Corinthians chapter 2:1, shows me the gradual change that was taking place Paul's character, as he walked with Christ.

"But I determined this with myself that I would not come again to you in heaviness."

Paul explains this in verse 14 of this 2nd chapter of II Corinthians, "Now thanks be to unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place."

Paul, perhaps since writing the first letter to this assembly, had learned that in spite of the evident problems these believers had, Christ would cause the truth to triumph, and so his hope in communicating with these believers lay with his Lord!

In II Corinthians 1:19-24, we are told why Paul no longer carries such a burden of concern over the souls of these believers. The reason is that he understands that their faith is a result of a work of the Spirit within them. (II Corinthians 1:21)

"Now he which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed you is God;"

I am not saying that he was no longer burdened for them, but that he came to fully realize that any spiritual work to be performed in them was a result of a work of God alone. In other words, Paul's responsibility was to remain faithful to God's work; the work was God's responsibility!

By the time Paul was near the end of his life (which is when Philippians was written) he had learned much concerning godly patience and humility. A consideration of what he says in his last letters gives us insight into his character. This is reflected in Philemon 9, where he calls himself Paul the aged, and humbles himself before a fellow believer.

It was during this period of his life when Paul had learned many things from the Lord, not only in matters of doctrine but also in matters of character, that he writes this epistle to the Philippians. The believer today is very similar to Paul as he walks his life of faith. We all may learn doctrine; that is the easy part. The difficult part is to apply what we have learned to our lives; this is the development of Christian character. In time, as we move through life, what we believe in doctrine slowly becomes part of our character as well.

Because Paul had learned all of these things in his life, he is an advisor to us, as fellow believers in the gospel.

II. The difference between behavior and character

A. In order to continue on in this study of the Christian's character, we need to define the difference between behavior and character.

- 1) Behavior deals with the manner in which a person conducts himself; what he takes pleasure in and in what he actively pursues in his life.
- 2) Character is the distinctive qualities or marks of personality traits, a set of moral or ethical values

B. The deeds of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit

In Scripture these two are referred to as 'deceitful lusts' Ephesians 4:22,
"That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts"

And 'the fruits of the Spirit', Ephesians 5:9 "For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth"

In Ephesians chapter 4:17, throughout the rest of this epistle, and in Colossians chapters 3 and 4, these things are laid out clearly for us.

In Philippians 1:11, Paul speaks to these believers concerning their character, referring to these things as the ‘fruits of righteousness’. “Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.”

These fruits, or evidence of maturity, are shown by them due to the presence of Christ and are for the glory of God. They are present in order that believers may be sincere (pure and genuine) and without offence till the day of Christ. These fruits of character reflect a heavenly way of life and are the result of the righteousness of Christ which is theirs.

Philippians 3: 9&20 “And be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith; For our conversation (way of life) is in heaven; for whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The deeds of the flesh are given to us in Colossians 3:5, and Ephesians 5: 3-6.

Colossians 3:5 “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”

These deeds are on the earth (earthy), and concern our old man Adam. These things are openly evident! The believer has put these works to death, through the work of the truth of the gospel through faith.

Eph. 4:20-23, and Col. 3:3, “But you have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: that ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.”

Because these works are put to death, the believer has moved into a different sphere; he has been renewed in the spirit of his mind; he has put on Christ and been declared a new man, not earthly but heavenly. Eph. 4:23-24, Col. 2:9-10, and Col. 3:10.

The works of the flesh are the things pursued and pleasured in by the children of disobedience (Colossians 3: 6-7). The works of the flesh are part of the past of the believer; they are not to be part of the believer’s present pursuit in his life.

The believer, as he matures in his walk with Christ, understands that the deeds of the flesh are no longer part of his experience, as they have been put to death through the cross of his Lord and Saviour. Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that this message was his intent in coming to them. I Corinthians 2:2 “For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

By the time he wrote these post-Acts letters, the believer is to know, as Paul understood, that the deeds of the flesh are no longer. The believer is indeed dead to this world, but made alive in Christ! The fruits of righteousness the mature believer is to pursue in his

life are those of virtue, and concern the essence of his character, some of them are given to us in Ephesians chapter 4:25-32.

C. The difference between inner-Acts and post-Acts

A close examination of the writings of Paul, comparing the inner-Acts with the post-Acts, reveals many things to the serious student of the Word. He will learn how the doctrine of Paul changes over the span of his life, and he will begin to understand how the very character of this man begins to change. Paul becomes a man that truly reflects the humility and genuine love of Christ towards his fellow believers. This is seen in the patience and care that he has for believers, for whom Christ had died, was buried and rose again to secure their heavenly position. His very character reflects the character of his Lord!

I will be so bold as to say that in the books written in the inner-Acts period you will find little said about the character of the believer. The things listed about character in Ephesians and Colossians, were not previously clearly defined for the believer, until these last books were written. Why would this be so?

I have three reasons why I believe this to be true, and they are:

1. The revelation that Paul received was progressive. The last things understood by any believer (including Paul) are the things concerning his character. Paul had to (as we do also) learn these things progressively throughout his life.
2. The reflections of the character of Christ were not understood in the inner-Acts books and
3. The character of Christ is the most difficult thing for any believer to set out to accomplish in his life. Therefore it is the last thing that the believer comes to understand.

1) Revelation is progressive. As we study Paul's books, we come to understand that the truth he received came to him progressively. In this study we are looking at the character of the believer, and I find very little written about this in the inner-Acts writings of Paul. I believe the reason that many do not understand this is because they do not study his books progressively. If you are not looking for something, you may not find it.

In the study of his writings (in a progressive manner), I believe that it is helpful to consider first his doctrine, and see how what he taught developed over his life time. Then to consider how what he came to believe became part of his very being, or his character! The doctrine of Paul is the 'what' of what he believed (his doctrine). The changing of his character is the 'so what', or the application into his life of what he believed. In my opinion, there are many believers in the world today who seem to understand many of the teachings of Christianity, yet fail to apply these things to their daily lives. They may have left the deeds of the flesh, yet fail to display the character of Christ in their lives, especially in their relationships with the world and with other believers!

- 2) Reflections of the character of Christ were not understood in the inner-Acts.

In the inner-Acts period of the revelation of Paul, the main event was the inclusion of believing Gentiles into the blessings promised to the nation of Israel. There was a constant struggle between Paul, who taught that the Gentiles were justified by faith alone, and those of believing Jews, who sought to place the believing Gentiles under the various laws and ordinances given to Israel. This was, in effect, an attempt to justify these Gentile believers by faith and by works. Paul was called in front of James and the twelve Apostles twice in the book of Acts, in order for them to consider what he was teaching to the Gentiles. These occasions are found in Acts 15:12-29, and 21:18-25.

The conclusion reached by James and the twelve was that the only rules required to be kept by the Gentiles were that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication. These rules all concern the deeds of the flesh.

The lack of Christian character was the problem of the many divisions that were evident within the assembly at Corinth. This is written in the inner-Acts period. Paul tells them this in II Corinthians 10: 3-5 “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh; (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.”

The believers in Corinth would not have had the divisions among themselves if they had cast down their vain imaginations and kept their every thought obedient to Christ. If they had displayed the love and humility of the Saviour in their character, there would never have been the selfish displays and divisions that became a problem within their assembly.

During the inner-Acts period of Paul’s revelation, there were many that were babes in Christ. The main things that were required of them were to keep from the deeds of the flesh. The character of Christ is only reflected in the mature believer. The early believers did not yet understand their responsibilities concerning their character. Paul never speaks of our responsibilities concerning these things until the Acts period had come to a close. The believers in the Acts period were not responsible for what had not been revealed to them.

As Paul began to understand and to exhibit the changes in his character due to his identification with Christ, he revealed to believers their own obligation to their Lord. We, as recipients of all the truth, are required to exhibit the love, humility, and character of our Saviour every day in our life upon this earth!

3) Not revealed to the young believer

The last part that changes in a person is his character, because it is the hardest thing to change. When the Lord calls a man to salvation, he first realizes that his pursuits of the flesh must go. Through the work of the Spirit of God in his life, over time, he is freed from these things. The last things he is faced with are the changes that concern his

character. I believe this is why these things are given to us in the last writings of Paul. They are the conflict that belongs to the New Man, who understands he is created in Christ Jesus for good works.

The fully complete man appears only in the post-Acts writings of Paul. It is the final realization of the mature believer, that he is indeed a new man! In Ephesians chapter 6, the spiritual armor of the New Man is given to him in order to help him perfect his Christian character. It is through an understanding of the gospel of peace that he is covered with truth and righteousness. Protected by his faith he dons the helmet and sword of God's word, helping in his battle of the Spirit. It is in our spirit (or our character of the old man) where the final battle lies for the believer. The mature believer understands these things, and seeks to use all the armor given to him to accomplish the goal of perfection (maturity), which is his in Christ.

Philippians 3: 14&15a, "I press toward the mark for the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded"

III. The true character of the believer (Colossians 3:12-15)

It is in the post-Acts books of Paul that the believer is told what is required of his character. As I said earlier, these things are the last and most difficult arena of battle in our Christian walk, and are the struggle of those that understand their position as the New Man. In Colossians chapter 3:12-15 we are given a clear view of what is required of us as believers.

"Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful."

We are first given our position. These are things that the mature believer has firmly grasped in his hands of faith. We are seen as the elect of God, declared as holy; and we are beloved by God, that is we are very dear to the Eternal One who has sent his Son to bring us close to Him.

Having been given this position we are told to actively strive to put on these things which are the very nature of our Saviour. We are to have mercies at the very center of our being, and as result we display kindness, humility, meekness (gentleness), and ever enduring patience. Above all things, we are not to hold anything against anyone; rather to conduct ourselves in a forgiving manner towards any who may have wronged us. The one primary attribute of our character is to be that we love others as God has loved us.

This is the bond of perfectness. Paul uses this term only here in Colossians 3:14. This may be because it is only in the post-Acts books (Ephesians and Colossians especially)

that Paul presents, and then instructs, the new and perfect man who has been made complete in Christ.

Conclusion:

In this world, there are many believers who have forgotten the importance of the exhibition of charity in their dealings with the world and with their fellow believers. Whether this is due to ignorance or disobedience it matters not! God's Word is God's Word!

This study has been about things that concern the believer and his character. I believe that the character of the believer is the last and most difficult part of the believer to bring into obedience to Christ. The character of the believer deals with the very core of being! Paul has been given to us as an example of a man who knew, both doctrinally and experientially, what it is to walk closely with Christ. His best advice to us as believers comes as he neared the end of his earthly life, when he came to understand the fullness of God's revelation given to him. The development of the believer may be traced progressively through the writings of Paul as he came to understand what it is to truly live by faith.

The importance of the character of the believer is fully revealed to us as Paul's revelation came near the end, and he could say with all certainty, "For me to live is Christ and to die gain!"