

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 1, 2019
Rev. Dr. David Thompson**

Developing Character

Hector McCruiry, a man of great character, and one of the wisest of Presbyterian ministers, was dying. People used to take his word as gospel truth whenever he was preaching. Now they stood around his bedside hoping for a memorable last word. Because he was so loved by his colleagues, they were trying to make his last moments as rewarding as possible for him. While the ministers were praying, one of the nurses came into the room and offered The reverend Hector a glass of warm milk to drink. But with what little strength he had left, Hector refused it. Seeing this, a young minister had an idea. He remembered that he had a bottle of Single Malt in his car. So, while his colleagues were watching Hector's laboured breaths, he quickly picked up the glass of milk and crept out to his car. He then opened the bottle of whiskey and poured a generous portion of it into the warm milk. He then went back to Hector's bedside and held the glass to Hector's lips.

"Go on Hector," said the young minister, "please drink some of this milk. It is Presbyterian milk. It will make you feel a lot better. Really it will." So, Hector took a small sip, stared at the glass, drank a little more, then smiled and finished every drop of the milk-and-Single Malt mixture. The other ministers were humbled when they saw Hector apparently making some kind of recovery. One of them said, "Hector, You have been such a man of character all your life and are known always for your wise words, please share some of your wisdom with us before you die!"

At this, Hector raised himself up in his bed and with a pious look on his face pointed out the window and said, "Whatever you do, don't sell that cow!"

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, o lord our strength and our Redeemer.

"God's gift was not a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of Power, and love and self-control."

2 Timothy 1:7

Viscount Tonypanady was a British politician, cabinet minister, and Speaker of the House of Commons. He was the man who read the Scripture lesson when Diana and Prince Charles were married in St Paul's Cathedral. On the occasion of his retirement, the Lord Chancellor said this of him: He was "a man who had demonstrated that politics is an honorable profession, that arrogance is not proof of strength, that vulgarity is not an essential ingredient of wit. He was a man who had made a thousand friends and virtually no enemies and who has remained faithful and unsullied in all the tribulations of this wicked distracted world."

What a wonderful tribute to the character of a man!

Is it fashionable to be a person of character today? Other things distract many of us. We are often materialistic and full of the values that go with that.

But character? Integrity?

Charles Allen was a successful young lawyer. He had everything he wanted: a beautiful wife, two fine young sons, a fabulous new home. He was full of confidence, energy, enthusiasm. He was living the North American Dream.

One night he went for a motorcycle ride which ended in the ditch. His spinal cord was irreparably damaged. He was rushed to hospital, given a tracheotomy, and put on a breathing apparatus. For months he was in critical condition not even able to blow out of his mouth. It was too much for his wife. Unable to bear seeing him this way she decided to divorce him. He had to give up his home. His old law firm was unable to keep him on the payroll. Charles Allen was at his lowest ebb, but while he was like this, a great truth came to him. He said: "I had to grasp the shining truth that those of us confined to beds or wheelchairs or solitary rooms still possess gifts of the highest order. We can still show love. We can display humour, courage, friendship, godliness, unencumbered by the demands placed on the able bodied... while I could not throw a baseball with my sons...I could be a better father...because my old materialism and ambition could no longer come between us."

I would like to make Charles Allen's point from St Paul. St. Paul said that the gift of the holy Spirit to us was not a gift of timidity or fear, but it was a Spirit of Power, love and self control. Charles Allen had to learn that from his wheelchair.

Let's start with St. Paul saying it was not a gift of fear or timidity.

One of the greatest forces in us all, that undermines integrity and character, is *fear*.

Now fear can also be a good thing. There is a good fear that comes from being pulled over by the police for speeding or driving under the influence. When we are being unkind or shredding another person's reputation, fear of loss of peer regard can be good. Gossip is always the talk of the powerless about the powerful.

Do we want to be powerless? Gossip. Works every time! Fear can make us think again and consider other virtue: turning away from bad habits, also known as repentance!

An old dictionary says that repentance is sorrow for sin with self condemnation, and then a complete turning from the sin. You give the sin your back! Have we done that lately or do we prefer the negative attention that can come from others?

A good fear of other people, a good fear of God, can lead us to repentance and a fundamental change in character. Have we got something against someone?

Repent! And when someone gives us a hard time over the phone or in a meeting for an occasion when we were malicious or just plain unkind, let us show understanding by hearing their criticism.

Someone said to me that they had relatives who went to church on a regular basis. They heard many a fine sermon on forgiveness, but the sermons never applied to them. They were always for other people. They thought how good it was for the people around them to hear this. But since it did not apply to them, they never forgave. They didn't go the second mile. They didn't turn the other cheek.

So yes, fear can be good.

But fear can also eat away at our character.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means at the point of the highest reality." What did he mean?

It's the sort of thing every politician faces on campaign when she meets a group of people with a single-issue agenda with which she disagrees. She wants their vote, but she disagrees. What does she do?

It's the sort of thing a student on a summer job faces when he is asked to dump some toxic waste by the side of the road. He knows it's wrong. He is afraid of whistle blowing. The money is good, and he likes the boss. What does he do?

It's the sort of thing a son faces when he finds out that his father is cheating on his income tax return. Does he do nothing, or does he rebuke his own father?

Courage is the mother of all virtues and when it is absent... all the others go.

Why do people lie? It's fear every time, fear of something or someone or some situation. Lying begins with our own self. Fear is the mother of **self deception**. We can never trust anyone who lies to themselves. If you are a Christian, have nothing to do with this kind of fear. This is what St. Paul calls timidity. It does not come from God.

St. Paul's second point is that the gift of the Holy Spirit is a gift of *Power*. The disciples quickly learned that knowledge was not enough. Even after the resurrection they were impotent until the gift of power from above came to blow away the barriers between people that led to inaction.

Life is incredibly complex. Barriers present themselves. Obstacles can get in our way. We can confront a maze of difficulties and see no easy way through. *But when the student is ready the teacher appears!* The gift of the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to direct us out of the maze of our personal problems! Here is the best scriptural advice I can give you to help you find a way where there is no way. Ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit to come into your heart. What the Bible means by 'heart' is the center of integration of our mind, emotions and intentions.

Scripture says that the Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirit to lead us into the truth, and that the truth will set us free. That is how we know it is the truth. So, if you have misgivings, listen to them at the heart level. The heart is far more than a pump. It has complex circuitry. It is where we fall in love. It also is wise and if we ask our hearts what to do, they know!

So, at the heart level ask for help. Permit a dialogue between your spirit and the Holy Spirit. Listen deeply in prayer. *We can know what to do*. The Holy Spirit will lead us into the truth.

Wait for it. When it is the right time to move you will know. Whatever difficulty you face, *you can know what to do*, and that knowledge *is power*, and that gift comes from asking: Jesus said, "Ask and you shall receive, knock and it shall be opened."

The third point St. Paul makes concerns **love**. What kind of Love? **Love of God, love of yourself and love of our neighbor, these three can be the greatest builders and sustainers of character.**

St. Augustine once said of love of God, self and neighbor; 'love and do what you like!' If we love like Christ did, it is very difficult to do something wrong because every wrong thing is unloving in some way.

Go down the commandments.

Do we commit adultery? Not if we love our mate. Not if we love ourselves.

Do we steal? Not if we love our neighbor. Not if we love ourselves.

Do we bear false witness? Not if we love our neighbor. Not if we love ourselves and want to become a person of character, full of self-respect.

Do we gossip about others?

Not if we respect ourselves. Actually, we don't need that negative attention. For we know it is true. What goes around comes around. Whatever we sow we reap, no exceptions.

St. Paul's fourth point is the gift of self-control. Self-control is important in at least four major areas:

1) The body!

Some people's character gets totally out of whack when it comes to sexual erotic love. Sexual morality is all over the place today; just like it was in the days of St. Paul in the Roman Empire. Fidelity is a rather unpopular virtue if we consult the modern film, the modern novel and the modern newspaper.

But it is impossible to build character without trust and fidelity in every aspect of life.

The marriage ceremony is an exemplar for every lasting relationship. Good relationships are all about 'for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health till death us do part.' If we have integrity and courage and a partner who will also commit at this level, we have fidelity. We begin our relationships with integrity, we keep our relationships with integrity and if we need to end a relationship we also do so with integrity.

When we want *the power* to resist temptation, we can receive it from the Holy Spirit. It is the gift of self control.

Self control applies to any addiction: Tobacco, too much coffee, overeating, drug abuse, failing to exercise. I once knew a woman who jokingly said: "Every time I feel the need to exercise, I lie down, until the feeling passes off."

Money is a great teacher about self control. I know a lot of folks who earn a bundle and never have any money. The income is there, but the spending habits?! In marriage counseling I often say to couples who have spending problems: Cut up the credit cards. Budget. Make a plan and stick to it. Self control is a gift from God. Ask for it. Money is a great way to manifest self control.

Ambition is another area where we need self control. Do we have a dream? Why are we dreaming it? Is it to feel powerful, to be the center of attention? Have we begun the dream with God? Ideally the politician who has character, seeks political office for only one reason - **to serve others.**

The power to continue to serve the best interests of other people, comes from God in the form of self-control- the actual fruit of self-control, is to serve others with humility.

Whatever business we are in, humility is always a mark of self control, and self control is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Let me make one point very, very clearly. We don't have to work and work at self-control.

Notice that some people have self control. It appears natural to them. Others are out of control on a regular basis. That leads me to St Paul's major thought here. **Self-control is a gift.** It is not something we can say is an achievement. It is a gift. I know a man who looked at a cigarette that he was smoking and suddenly said' "What am I doing this for?" He stubbed it out and never had another. At that moment he received the gift of self-control. Do we really

want self control? Then let's get serious and ask God for it. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. If you don't take away anything from this sermon but this truth, it will be enough. Self control is a spiritual gift.

Let me close with the rest of the story of Charles Allen, the wheelchair paralytic. Gradually he learned how to control his breathing. Then by blowing and sucking into a device he was able to steer his wheelchair. He bought himself a condominium and moved in. Then he began to look for a job. He got one as a judge in a courtroom. He became known for his humour, his wisdom and his fair judgments. He couldn't write but could he dictate! Soon he was able to take on a full caseload.

Not content with that, he decided to serve others. He joined a group that went into prisons to talk to inmates. He would begin; "Here you are behind bars. I'm in prison too, in this wheelchair." Gradually the tension would lesson. He would tell them; "Look it is possible to break through the walls of loneliness and bitterness and God stands by ready to help you do that."

Charles Allen says; "It is wonderful to see a spark of love kindle in these inmates who think that they have been forgotten by their fellow human beings." As a Christian he holds simply to the truth he finds in this verse: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." His faith carries him forward!

Whatever prisons we are constructing for ourselves today of ego, pride or ambition; whatever castles of fear, we have built around ourselves, we can break out of them all and come instead into the city of INTEGRITY.

"God's gift is not a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of Power, Love and self-control."

Do you want these gifts of the Spirit?

Jesus said; "Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you, for the one who asks receives, the one who seeks finds and the one who knocks has the door opened to them."

What do we find? **Character.**

What do we receive? **The blessing of God.**

What door is opened? *The door that opens is the door to the greatest meaning of life- to be able to live with Integrity and joy in the here and now, and one day to be able to meet the God who made us, with straight eyes!*

Amen!