

"Character Still Counts"

Proverbs 4:10-18; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

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Today we seem to live in a time of moral confusion and a lack of ethical leadership. Most of us may agree on the problem, but then this raises the question, "What can we do about it?" Is there a way that character issues can be addressed?

One English schoolmaster was aghast at the lack of religious training in the youngsters under his tutelage. He reputedly took things into his own hands with the following threat, "Boys, you will believe in the Holy Ghost by five o'clock this afternoon or I will beat you till you do." Perhaps he meant well, but you just can't force people into belief or a change of attitude. You can't bring about good character by threats or even rewards.

Does a society which emphasizes materialism and power condition us to act in self-serving ways or do our baser desires drive us to grab what is not rightly ours? Which should be blamed? Maybe it's in both our culture and our character that the problem lies. Perhaps they reinforce each other, both for good and for bad. Our Table Talk discussion touched on some of this today as it dealt with the role of sports in America, especially in light of recent revelations involving the National Football League.

When I was young a common question to ask was, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" For white boys the answer was more often than not, "President of the United States." Racial and gender inequality, being what they were then, precluded African-American males and girls of any color from such aspirations.

Well, we've broken one of those barriers and I hope that we can soon get to a time when national press conferences might begin, "**Madam** President...."

If that's what boys of my era wanted to be, is that still what children identify with today? Who are the role models young people wish to emulate now?

Current surveys lift up some disappointing answers. An article from the Huffington Post pointed to pop stars like Lindsay Lohan, Justin Beiber, Miley Cyrus, and any cast member from *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. And then there are lots of sports heroes whose escapades only seem to make them more attractive.

Part of the problem today is that some high-profile figures have made poor choices or committed offenses that besmirched both their name and the position of trust they held. Sometimes they dropped quickly off the pedestal, but then popped right back up.

There's the well-known case of a Southern governor who went missing after saying he was hiking along the Appalachian Trail, only to be discovered in Argentina with his mistress. After leaving his governorship in disgrace he re-emerged and was elected to Congress less than

two years later. Maybe folks there thought that he was the best they could get or they simply forgot.

This struggle for the hearts and minds of people isn't something new at all. The reading today from the Book of Proverbs lifts up such tensions within society and, indeed, within each person. Simply put, Proverbs show us that there is a better way and a lesser way. One road leads to fulfillment and the other leads to destruction, and we have to choose which path we will take. Each day there are forks in the road where we can go this way or that, but not both at once.

The final verse in our passage today is a summary: "The path of righteousness is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day." While here presented as wisdom passed down from parent to child, it truly applies to all generations.

I mentioned the Presidency a few moments ago. One of those leaders I looked up to as a youngster was Dwight Eisenhower. It was not just simple respect, but also that his picture was high on the wall of my classroom alongside Washington and Lincoln.

Norman Vincent Pearle once asked the President who was the greatest man he had ever met, knowing that he had rubbed shoulders with every great leader of his time. Eisenhower thought for a moment and then said, "The greatest person I ever met wasn't a man. It was a woman. It was my mother. She never had much schooling but she was wise in God's wisdom.

"Once when I was a boy my brothers and I were playing a game with my mother. A hand of cards was dealt and I remember that night mother dealt me an utterly impossible hand and I began to complain about it.

"She said, 'Boys, put your cards down. I want to tell you something, especially you, Dwight. You are playing a game in your home with your mother under loving circumstances. We all love each other here and I have dealt you a bad hand. Now when you get out in life, where they don't love you so much, you are going to be dealt many a bad hand. What are you going to do? You are to pray to God. You are to trust God and like a man you are to play out the hand dealt you.'

"And that is one of the wisest things I learned in my youth."

Parents teach their children many things in growing up, but perhaps the most important is to develop good character. According to the dictionary "character" is moral or ethical strength; integrity; fortitude. It is something that is hard to describe specifically in a person, but it is apparent when they have it. Character is an intangible, but yet it gives the form to a man's or woman's life. It's invisible, yet obvious.

Paul also has a great deal to say about character though he approaches it through a description of conduct in Ephesians. In this part of his letter he suggests how one should behave in Christian community. There's a distinct change that ought to take place when we become persons of faith.

What are some of those ways? Truthfulness is one. This is not only to avoid telling lies within the fellowship, but it's also the willingness to reveal ourselves before others. Pride and fear often keeps us from allowing our true self to be known. Without deeper sharing, however, we only know the shell of others. He advises us to receive each other generously, as we realize that no life is without its faults—including our own.

Paul says, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Certainly there will be times when we are frustrated with others or disappointed by them. They will do things from time to time which irritate us, and we will do the same to them. So it's not so much *if* natural difficulties will arise, but what we do *when* they come up. Reconciliation should be our goal and we should resolve our problems quickly before they fester and spread.

Thieves, he admonished, must give up stealing. Don't forget that Christianity had its earliest response from the outcasts of society. This is a reminder that Jesus' gospel is not for the righteous already, but those who know they are sinners. Converts who used to rely on stealing for their livelihood must become a new person in Christ. In a broader sense we must **all** see that we steal from one another when we fail to share God's gifts with those in greater need, when we keep resources to ourselves while others around us suffer.

Paul goes on to say, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." When we sin against our brothers and sisters in the faith we also sin against the Divine Spirit which is the thread that holds us together. To wrong another member in the faith community is more than to be inconsiderate; it is an offense against God. Remember who brings you together and do not create disruptions in the unity of the body. Where there is bitterness and wrangling and slander, replace it with kindness and tenderness and forgiveness for that's the better way and the mark of the Christian.

Finally, he said, "Be imitators of God and live in love as Christ loved us." Our character ought to be built on God's character as revealed in Jesus. You can strive to be virtuous for any number of reasons such as to achieve fame or to please another. The true life of virtue, however, is not one of achievement, but one of response. Because God loves us, we should strive to love God in the fullest way we can and love others as we love ourselves.

If we are to be character builders for the next generation we must be people of character ourselves. That's part of why we come together regularly as a fellowship. We need to learn the better way, and much of that gain comes from each other. And as we discover the divine link between all of us in this setting, we begin to find the extension of it in the wider reach of life as well. God needs persons of character to carry out important work in the world and, surprisingly, we are the ones chosen to do it. That's gratifying to hear, but it reminds us of the responsibility that goes with the honor.