

A Life of Character

Rich Nathan
February 27 & 28, 2016
The Good Life
Matthew 4:1-11

Who here has taken a personality test at some point in your life? The Myers-Briggs, a D.I.S.C. test, the Enneagram, a 5 Factor Test, MMPI Test. Hold up your fingers, how many personality tests you have taken?

There is no end to the personality tests you can take online. Among the most scientific personality tests is the following:

Picture of “Which Looney Tunes Character Are You?”

Are you Bugs Bunny?

Picture of Bugs Bunny

Confident and clever, you love being the center of attention.

Are you Elmer Fudd?

Picture of Elmer Fudd

OK, you’re not necessarily going to be in the National Honor Society, but you’re a hard worker, you don’t give up easily.

Are you Daffy Duck?

Picture of Daffy Duck

You’re not afraid to speak your mind and let the chips fall where they may.

Maybe you are Pepe Le Pew

Picture of Pepe Le Pew

You’re the ultimate romantic, always searching for your one true love.

If you’re looking for a personality test that is used by psychoanalysts all over the world, then here it is.

Picture of “Which Star Wars Character are You?”

Are you Luke Skywalker?

Picture of Luke Skywalker

Eager and adventurous.

Are you Princess Leia?

Picture of Princess Leia

Bold and unwavering.

Are you C-3PO?

Picture of C-3PO

Logical and calculated.

Perhaps you are Yoda

Picture of Yoda

Wise beyond all measure.

If you take the test and you are most like Darth Vader,

Picture of Darth Vader

Please feel free after the service to sprint to your car and drive rapidly off of our property. You don’t need to meet me at Guest Central for any reason at all.

Here’s the good news, Darth Vaders among us, you can always turn away from the Dark Side.

There are hundreds of these personality tests online.

Picture of “Which Character of the Fresh Prince of Bel Air are you?”

There is no end to personality tests.

I was listening to a Christian radio program on marriage some years ago, and a therapist divided personalities into four animal types.

Picture – upper left a lion, lower left an otter, upper right a beaver, lower right golden retriever

I came home and said to my wife, Marlene, “I just learned by listening to this therapist why we sometimes talk past each other. I am a lion-otter and you are a beaver-retriever.”

While we spend tons of time in the United States with personality testing in making hiring decisions, in team building, in pre-marital assessments, in counseling, even in slotting people in the US Army, I have never taken even one character test designed to measure my degree of honesty, my morality, and the extent to which I possess or lack integrity.

Yet I suggest to you that way, way more important than our personalities as a contributing factor to any one of us living the good life is, to paraphrase Dr. King,

The Content of Our Character

Over the last few weeks, our entire church, from preschoolers to elementary school kids, middle schoolers, high schoolers, young adults, older adults, have all been learning about the Good Life – the life God created us to live. What it is and how we can find it. We’ve been looking at this question of the Good Life through our weekend messages and through the creation of hundreds of new small groups. We now have over 700 small groups involving thousands and thousands of people who are watching videos on aspects of the Good Life and through individual devotions.

Today, I want to talk about one essential aspect of the Good Life and that is A Life of Character. Let’s Pray.

Let me give you a road map of where I’m going today, I’m going to briefly answer three questions.

- First, why is character important?
- Second, how is character defined?
- Third, what are some tests of character?

So, let’s take these in turn first.

Why is character important?

For one thing, a lack of character costs every one of us a huge amount of money each year.

Without character we pay more

One study said that retail crime – employee theft, shoplifting, and fraud – cost retailers over \$42 billion per year. That’s over \$400 per household that you and I have to pay to grocery stores and clothing stores and department stores and other retailers to cover their losses because of people’s poor character.

Insurance fraud of all kinds costs another \$80 billion to the US economy. Insurance fraud raises our rates on auto insurance and homeowners insurance and health insurance. And, of course, all of that is peanuts compared to the amount that each of us had to pay to bail out the big banks and Wall Street investment firms because of the horrific character of a relatively few folks who decided to bundle ultra-high risk subprime mortgages and then sell them to gullible investors. Our economy literally rises and falls based upon people’s character.

Why is character important? Because

Without Character Government Regulates More

You know, when citizens in a country lack internal character which causes them to voluntarily choose to do the right thing government steps in and imposes external regulations. You don’t like big government? Well, here’s the deal, friend. An internal lack of self-control will always lead to external control. If we can’t trust each other, then we need an agency to inspect everything all the time and force people to do the right thing.

Why is character important? Because

Without Character Long Term Relationships Fail More

Many people who have otherwise succeeded in life – they’re bright, they’ve gotten good grades, they may be forging a great career path – many people who have otherwise succeeded will ultimately fail because of poor character.

Long term, employees will leave businesses if their bosses have bad character. Long term, marriages that aren’t built on a foundation of good character will collapse. Long term, families that aren’t built on a foundation of good character will collapse. Long

term, Christian ministries and Christian churches and Christian missions that aren't built on a foundation of good character will collapse.

Listen to me, if you're going to choose someone to date, don't short-change the importance of great character. It doesn't matter how good looking the other person is, how wealthy they are, how successful they are at their jobs, or how they make you feel. The foundation of any long term romantic success is going to be that other person's character.

If the person regularly lies to you or if you see them regularly lying to other people, run for the hills. They are not safe people. Before you get romantically involved with someone, you need to ask yourself some hard questions about the other person's character. Is their word their word? Are they reliable? Do they enjoy a good reputation with other people? Are they hard workers? Are they stingy? Are they racists? Are they free from all addictions? Are there any warning signs about potential abuse?

When you are making a decision about something as important as romance or hiring a person in your business or forming a business partnership with another person or you're making a decision about marriage, about appointing someone to church leadership, charisma and competence and confidence and cuteness are not enough. We have to look at a person's character.

Why is character important? Let me speak to those who consider yourselves followers of Christ. I know that not everyone that I'm talking to right now considers themselves to be a follower of Christ. Some of you are not confident that you have a personal relationship with Christ that's making a real difference in your life. Some of you aren't sure where you stand with Christ. If you are not yet a follower of Christ, I want you to just overhear something that I'm saying to Christians right now.

Without Character [Christian Witness Fails](#) More

The way we make our Christian faith attractive is by living lives that evoke admiration from those who are outside the Christian faith. People say, "I may argue with your philosophy, but I can't argue with your life. The fact is, you are living a better life than me."

That's how I felt when I met Marlene. As most of you know, I was raised in a Jewish family. I was pretty much of an atheist by the time I met Marlene during my freshman year in college. What won me over was not the quality of her arguments, but the quality of her life. I couldn't deny the fact that she was a better person than me. She was more honest, she was more forgiving, and she was less judgmental, less cynical, and kinder to unlovely people and so on. It was the attractive power of Marlene's life that made me consider whether her Christian faith was true.

The problem, of course, with the church and the problem with followers of Christ today is that we are often not attractive. We are no different than the world around us. A fighting, divided, angry church has nothing to say and nothing to give to a fighting, divided, angry and violent world. A racially segregated church has nothing to say to a racially segregated world. An immoral church has nothing to say or to give to an immoral world. A church in which the leaders are full of greed and live lavish lifestyles has nothing to say to a greedy world. A church with abusive leaders has nothing to say to a world of abusive politicians.

In short, a church that is bad news cannot hope to attract people to the good news of the gospel. And parents, let me pause here and ask you a question. Since having good character is so important to your children's future enjoyment of the good life, how much time do you spend intentionally trying cultivate good character in the lives of your kids? We parents can spend way more time focused on what our children are achieving academically or what our children are achieving athletically than whether our kids grow up to be people of good character.

How is character defined?

How would you define good character? Let me read to you what I wrote in my journal. I think it would be worthwhile for every one of you who's listening to me now to ask yourself the question: How would I define good character?

Here's what I wrote in my journal:

People with good character do the right thing even if...

Even if:

- They're under pressure
- It costs them money
- It's unpopular
- It's hard
- They're tired
- They feel like doing something else
- No one will ever know

Someone with good character will maintain an internalized standard of doing the right thing even if.

Here's another way I defined good character:

People of good character are safe people

They're safe:

- To leave alone with your husband or wife, your boyfriend or girlfriend, with your children
- With your reputation – you trust them to protect you and to protect your good name when you're not there
- With your stuff – you trust them around your money, with your house, with your car, with your wallet, with your credit card numbers
- In handling your family's stuff – you trust them to handle your parents' estate, your siblings' estate, to be scrupulously honest, to be fair
- With your career – you're not going to find yourself suddenly stabbed in the back

People of good character are safe people.

The synonym that I like for character is integrity.

Character = Integrity

People with Good Character have integrity

John Stott, the great English preacher, wrote this:

“‘Integrity’ is the quality of an integrated person. In particular, integrated [people] are at peace, not at war, with themselves. Instead of being conscious of a dichotomy between our various beliefs, or between our beliefs and our behavior, so that we are ‘torn apart’ inside, there is an inner harmony. We are ‘all of a piece’, or whole people.”

Someone with integrity is the opposite of a hypocrite. People with integrity are not different in different situations, choosing one face at church and another face at work. A person of good character doesn't live a divided life. Let me apply this issue of character and integrity to the issue of having sexual integrity.

Genesis 2:24 says “For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh.”

Throughout the Bible, God tells us to not have sex with someone we're not married to because the purpose of sex is designed to create “one flesh”. What does that mean?

Now, inasmuch as we live in a university city in the 21st century, let me try to make this as clear as possible. According to the Bible, sex was created to say to someone else, “I belong exclusively to you with every aspect of my being. Socially, legally, financially, physically, emotionally, spiritually.” In other words, the act of sex is an expression of whole life oneness. So, when we talk about sexual integrity, here's what we mean. Integrate your body with the rest of your life!

If you've given your whole life to someone and you receive their whole life, then go ahead and give your body. But if you haven't given your whole life and you haven't received their whole life then you're living without sexual integrity. If you're having sex outside of marriage what you're really saying is "I want physical oneness, but let's not demand that we give ourselves completely to each other. I want your body, but I'm not willing to entrust myself entirely to you. I still want to hold on to my money, I still want to hold on to my space, I still want to make unilateral decisions. And I sure don't want all of you – your problems, your debt, your issues, your mother. I want to separate sex out from the rest of my life." God says sex involves total self-commitment. But someone listening to me might say, "For me, sex is just the manipulation of body parts." That's a lack of sexual integrity.

Let me share with you a brief video of a member of our congregation, John Doyel, and how he was able to develop sexual integrity when he lacked it.

Video

We talked about why character is important, what character is – let's consider the third question

What are some tests of character?

Each of these three temptations tests the quality of our character in different ways.

Let's look at the first temptation.

Matthew 4:1-3

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted[a] by the devil.
2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

What is the character test here? And how does it tie in to our experience of the good life. The test very simply is all about

How we use power

The good life is not just about having power, having influence. It is all about how you use your power and influence. We all have been given a measure of power, a measure of influence. The question presented to Jesus in this temptation was: will you use your power to serve yourself or will you restrict the use of your power to serve other people.

Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer's Church, tells this story about how one woman became a member of his church. He said that after church a woman came up to him and he asked her how she found her way to the church. She said, "Let me tell you. I work for a TV network here in the city, I totally screwed up a project I was working on. I thought I was going to lose my job. But my immediate supervisor took the blame for me. He was a guy who was well liked, he had a lot of professional credibility. He took the hit, he took the blame for me. If he hadn't, I would have lost my job. So I went in and sat down and said that I never met anyone like you. I've worked in the TV business for years and I've seen superiors take credit for what the people under them did, but I've never been around a superior who took the blame for what folks under them did. Why did you do that?"

And he said, since you asked let me tell you. I'm a Christian, and Jesus Christ took the blame for me, and that has shaped the way in which I do everything including my work."

Isn't that amazing? Have you ever done anything like this? Have you ever voluntarily taken the blame for someone else's mistake when you easily could have thrown them under the bus? If so, you have good character!

Moms, Dads, do you use the power you have over your children to throw your weight around? Do you use your power to insist on your own way, to criticize, to bully, to put down, to nag? Or do you use your power and authority to encourage your kids, to help them envision their future, to communicate blessing to your children?

The good life is all about how we use our power. Do we use our power to serve ourselves or do we use our power to serve others? Here's a second test of character

How we find God

We usually – at least in the church – think that finding God is the indispensable element in experiencing the good life. But the good life is more subtle than that. The Good Life is all about how we find God.

Matthew 4:5-7

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'[c]"

7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

The temptation here to Jesus is “Jesus, do something so spectacular that there will be no doubt in the mind of even the world’s biggest skeptic that there is a God and that you are the Messiah sent by God to save us from our sin.”

Notice that each temptation is a temptation to do something spectacular, something showy. Jesus, give us an unmistakable display of power. Jesus seems to think that God wants him to work in quieter ways, in hidden ways, in more discreet and less obvious ways. Because Jesus doesn’t want to force us to follow him. He wants us to voluntarily choose to follow him, by trusting him even if we don’t have irrefutable proof.

Think about how Jesus works in your life. Is it mostly very showy? Is the way Jesus works in your life mostly very loud, very obvious to anyone who’s looking on? Or is his work quieter, often hidden requiring you to pay attention, to slow down, to exercise faith? Don’t you want Jesus to do something so spectacular that he shuts up all the loud mouth, arrogant people who hate God? “Jesus, empty a hospital and do so on national TV with hundreds of cameras focused on you as you go bed to bed growing limbs, raising the dead.” Sometimes I want to yell, “Defend yourself, Jesus! Prove to people who you are so that they’ll be able to find God!” “Jesus, do something so spectacular that I will never doubt again and I will always follow you.”

But then I remember that at his trial, Jesus refused to defend himself. He was totally silent in the face of false and slanderous charges. Maybe, just maybe, that’s the way of Jesus all the time. Jesus won’t defend himself. Jesus refuses, at least in this age, to shut up the loud mouths who still hurl slanderous accusations at him. He refuses to do something so obvious that you and I will never doubt again. He waits patiently for people to voluntarily choose to follow him.

The Good Life is all about voluntarily choosing to put your trust in Christ. God will not coerce you. God will not force you to follow Christ. He will give you enough reason to take a step of faith. But you will find both at the beginning of your journey with Christ and also throughout your life, you’re always going to have to choose to trust that this is the way of Christ.

Here’s the third and last test

How we achieve success

Matthew 4:8-10

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

10 Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’

The Good Life is not just about success in life. The Good Life is about how we achieve success. The temptation to Jesus was for Jesus to take a shortcut to success.

This is the constant temptation that leads us away from good character. The temptations that’s whispered in our ears, “You could enjoy the good life without ever having to experience pain. You don’t have to experience the pain of embarrassment by admitting that you’re ever wrong. You don’t have to experience the pain of correction. You don’t have to experience the pain of being transparent by going in to counseling. You don’t have to experience the pain by standing by your commitments rather than walking away when things get too hard. You don’t have to experience the pain of self-denial by completely stopping something you are addicted to. You can be a success and enjoy the good life without any pain.”

A very famous politician once said this,

“I wish I had a great marriage. See, my father was always very proud of me, but the one thing that he got right was that he had a great marriage. He was married for 64 years. One of my ex-wives once said to me, “You have to work at a marriage.” And I said, “That’s the most ridiculous thing, because my parents, they didn’t work at their marriage. If you have to work at a marriage, it’s not going to work. It has to be a sort of natural thing.” But my ex-wife would say, “You have to work at this, you have to work at that, you have to do this, you have to do that.” And I’m saying to myself, “Man, I work all day long, well into the evening. I don’t want to come home and work on a marriage. A marriage has to be very easy otherwise, I don’t want it.”

What do you think of that? Would you want to be married to someone like that? Does that view of marriage and of life cause you to respect someone more or less? Do you think he’s enjoying the good life?

Scott Peck in his best-selling book, *People of the Lie*, said,

Slide (ends with the phrase pain of self-reproach)

“The words, “image”, “appearance”, and “outward” are crucial to understanding the morality of [bad character]. The evil person’s “goodness” is all on a level of pretense. It is, in effect, a lie. That is why they are “People of the Lie.”

Actually, the lie is designed not so much to deceive others as to deceive themselves. They cannot or will not tolerate the pain of self-reproach.”

A person who will not embrace voluntary suffering, a person who avoids pain at all costs, the pain of embarrassment, the pain of examining their own conscience and

motives, the pain of introspection, the pain of apologizing, the pain of backing down, that person is someone psychiatrist Scott Peck would label as “people of the lie”.

And a person like that, no matter how successful, they are a person of bad character.

Jesus is the model of the Good Life built on good character. Because Jesus voluntarily embraced suffering. He allowed himself to be tried on trumped up charges, to be slandered and falsely accused, to be stripped, spit on, and beaten. He allowed himself to be crucified, to die a horribly violent death. Not to pay for his sins, but to pay for our sins. Jesus is the one person who you can unreservedly follow because he has amazingly good character. He was willing to suffer for you and me.

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Matthew 4:1-11

I. Why is character important?

- A. Without character we pay more
- B. Without character government regulates more
- C. Without character long-term relationships fail more
- D. Without character Christian witness fails more

II. How is character defined?

- A. People with good character do the right thing even if...
- B. People with good character are safe people
- C. People with good character have integrity

III. What are some tests of character?

- A. How we use power
- B. How we find God
- C. How we achieve success