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HOLY RIGHTEOUS GODLY CHARACTER...DO WE REALLY HAVE IT?

People love to play games. Games are exciting. Games can replace reality. Games can distract the attention away from reality. Some people manage to convince themselves that the games they play ARE reality ... but they are only playing games. Their lives consist of the games they play.

Entertainment, in all its varied forms (i.e. TV shows, radio, movies, live performances, sports events, music, competitions, etc.), is by far the biggest industry worldwide ... and "the best players" have the highest incomes. We are willing to pay a great deal for the games we watch and play and listen to.

Years ago there was a song about "the games people play" ... the ways in which we sometimes deceive ourselves and others through the "images" we try to project. In the Bible we are told the same thing in slightly different words ...

SURELY EVERY MAN WALKETH IN A VAIN SHEW: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up [riches], and knoweth not who shall gather them. (Psalm 39:6)

Yes, we human beings love to play games!

BUT GOD DOES NOT PLAY ANY GAMES!

And WE are Christians, members of the Church of God, the Church Jesus Christ founded on the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. And so while playing games is a very popular thing with people all around us, we know that a Christian life is not a game we play. For us there can be no putting up of a facade. Christianity is a full-time profession ... there is no room for "amateur status" in true Christianity. We are required by God to LIVE Christianity every waking moment of our lives, not just an hour or two every week when we attend church services.

And the one thing that the entire Christian life revolves around is ... THE DEVELOPMENT OF HOLY RIGHTEOUS GODLY CHARACTER!

Godly character is not a game we can play ... godly character has got to be for real! When we REALLY study the Bible with a desire to understand the thoughts of the Almighty Creator God of all things, then Hebrews 4:12 should become a fairly common experience for us, should it not?

FOR THE WORD OF GOD [IS] QUICK, AND POWERFUL, AND SHARPER THAN ANY TWOEDGED SWORD, PIERCING EVEN TO THE DIVIDING ASUNDER OF SOUL AND SPIRIT, and of the joints and marrow, and [is] a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

When last did we experience that the Bible can "CUT us to the heart", as was the case in Acts 7:54? And when that happened, how did we react ... with repentance, or with anger, as did the people in Acts 7:54?

"When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth." (Acts 7:54 AV)

When last did we experience that the Bible is indeed profitable for reproof and for correction FOR US PERSONALLY, as Paul explained in 2 Timothy 3:16? Or do we just focus on correct academic and doctrinal understanding, things that don't in any way affect our image of self?

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: (2 Timothy 3:16 AV)

THE WAY THINGS WERE

The Church of God has changed over the past few decades. A few decades ago we were young and full of zeal, but we often lacked wisdom and understanding. We saw it as our responsibility to fulfill Isaiah 58:1 ...

CRY ALOUD, SPARE NOT, LIFT UP THY VOICE LIKE A TRUMPET, AND SHEW MY PEOPLE THEIR TRANSGRESSION, and the house of Jacob their sins. (Isaiah 58:1)

And so in our zeal we spelled out how and where and why God's people needed to change. In the process very often we ourselves did "the cutting". And so, not surprisingly, in many cases many of us ministers were perceived as very harsh and unkind. Many members of the Church came to fear the ministry.

Sometimes there is a NEED for "cutting", though that is by no means the case all the time. But when there is such a need, then it is THE WORD OF GOD that should do "the cutting", as Hebrews 4:12 tells us. It is the responsibility of the ministry to present and to explain the Word of God, but it is the Word of God itself that will at times "cut us to the heart".

Obviously that is not pleasant! We don't really like to face our sins and our shortcomings. We would much rather talk about correct doctrinal understanding and historical details, etc., things that don't present a threat to our self-image. But historical details and correct doctrinal understanding of any number of technical points don't really impact on godly character in a major way.

While there may indeed have been an over-emphasis on Isaiah 58:1 in the past, it seems that today we have gone to the other extreme. This Scripture is only mentioned very seldom and the principle involved is hardly ever invoked. The Apostle Paul instructed Timothy as follows:

PREACH THE WORD; be instant in season, out of season; REPROVE, REBUKE, EXHORT with all longsuffering and doctrine. (2 Timothy 4:2)

We all like to be "exhorted" ... but can the ministry actually still "reprove and rebuke" God's people if and when this is needed? Or have we rejected such an approach? WHY did Paul give these instructions to Timothy? Notice ...

FOR THE TIME WILL COME WHEN THEY WILL NOT ENDURE SOUND DOCTRINE; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; AND THEY SHALL TURN AWAY [THEIR] EARS FROM THE TRUTH, and shall be turned unto fables. (2 Timothy

This is speaking about the people of God! Now in the 60's and 70's the people of God DID accept and endure "sound doctrine". And therefore that was not the time when they needed to be "reproved and rebuked", even though they often were.

But it is NOW, at this present time, that a large number of people, who really should be "God's people", are not enduring sound doctrine. It is NOW that many people have turned away their ears from the truth and accepted heresies instead. And therefore it is NOW that Paul's instruction to "reprove and rebuke" is needed. And it is THE WORD OF GOD that reproves and rebukes us!

If we are going to develop real godly character in our lives, then we have to be receptive to the ways in which God's Word reproves and rebukes us and cuts us to the heart like a two-edged sword. We can't afford to play games with God.

It is not my intention to in any way "get at you" in this article. It is not my intention to "point a finger" at anyone. But the Word of God is indeed quick and sharp and powerful, and it can EASILY cut very deeply! When that happens, we will often focus on the people who bring God's truth to our attention, rather than on the Word of God itself. It is my hope that you will discern and focus on the instructions and the principles which God has recorded for us in His Word.

Let's now look at what is the main purpose of a Christian life ... the development of holy righteous godly character. Let's start off by looking at some statements about godly character by Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong.

SOME QUOTATIONS FROM "MYSTERY OF THE AGES"

All of the following quotations are referenced to the hard cover edition of Mr. Armstrong's book "MYSTERY OF THE AGES". Let's start off by looking at what Mr. Armstrong said about GOD'S character:

Pages 47-48:

"Most important of all however is what is God's nature -- His character -- like? One cannot know what God is unless he knows what His character is!

The character of both God the Father and Christ the Son is that of spiritual holiness, righteousness and absolute perfection.

That character might be summed up in the one word love, defined as an outflowing, loving concern. It is the way of giving, serving, helping, sharing, not the 'get' way.

It is the way devoid of coveting, lust and greed, vanity and selfishness, competition, strife, violence and destruction, envy and jealousy, resentment and bitterness."

Notice that Mr. Armstrong equated God's "character" with "God's nature". In other words, our "character" is an expression of what we ARE, even as God's character is an expression of what God is like. And since God wants us to become as He is, it means we need to somehow end up having the same character as God.

The Bible is very clear in pointing out that Jesus Christ, who will be the firstborn of many brethren once

the first resurrection takes place, has the exact same CHARACTER as God the Father. Notice ...

Who being the brightness of [his] glory, and THE EXPRESS IMAGE OF HIS PERSON, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; (Hebrews 1:3)

The Greek expression translated as "the express image of his person" is "charakter tes hupostaseos". The word "hupostasis" means "a foundation", literally "that which stands under something". This verse tells us not only that Jesus Christ has the same brightness of glory that God the Father has, but also that Jesus Christ has THE SAME CHARACTER, BUILT ON THE SAME FOUNDATION, as that of God the Father. It is in CHARACTER that God the Father and Jesus Christ are totally identical!

So how do we obtain such character? Notice what Mr. Armstrong explained.

Pages 69-70:

"But there was one super-important quality that even God's creative powers could not create instantly by fiat--the same perfect, holy, righteous character inherent in both God and the Word!

This kind of character must be developed, by the choice and the intent of the one in whom it comes to exist.

So mark well this super-vital truism-- that perfect, holy and righteous character is the supreme feat of accomplishment possible for Almighty God the Creator--it is also the means to His ultimate supreme purpose! His final objective!

But how?

I repeat, such perfect character must be developed. It requires the free choice and decision of the separate entity in whom it is to be created. But, further, even then it must be instilled by and from the Holy God who, only, has such righteous character to endow.

But what do we mean by righteous character?

Perfect, holy and righteous character is the ability in such separate entity to come to discern the true and right way from the false, to make voluntarily a full and unconditional surrender to God and his perfect way--to yield to be conquered by God--to determine even against temptation or self-desire, to live and to do the right. And even then such holy character is the gift of God. It comes by yielding to God to instill HIS LAW (God's right way of life) within the entity of who so decides and wills.

Actually, this perfect character comes only from God, as instilled within the entity of his creation, upon voluntary acquiescence, even after severe trial and test.

I have devoted a few paragraphs to this point because it is the supreme pinnacle means in God's overall purpose!"

Notice first that Mr. Armstrong emphasised that this godly character "MUST BE DEVELOPED BY THE CHOICE AND THE INTENT OF THE ONE IN WHOM IT COMES TO EXIST"!

On page 101 Mr. Armstrong restated this as follows:

Page 101:

"Character must be developed with the assent, will and action of the separately created entity. It is imparted by God and must be willingly received by that entity."

For godly character to be developed in us, it requires our active participation ... we must first WANT to have godly character, and then we must be prepared to WORK (active participation!) towards achieving it.

Next, notice how Mr. Armstrong defined godly character:

- 1) the ability to discern what is right in God's sight;
- 2) to voluntarily and unconditionally surrender to God;
- 3) to determine to faithfully do what is right;
- 4) ... even in the face of strong temptations to do wrong;
- 5) yielding to God to instill His law in us;
- 6) and then godly character is STILL "the gift" of God.

On page 201 Mr. Armstrong stated:

"Those called into the Church were called not merely for salvation and eternal life, but TO LEARN THE WAY OF GOD'S GOVERNMENT AND DEVELOP THE DIVINE CHARACTER during this mortal life in the Church age." (my emphasis)

The point to notice is that character-development also involves a learning-process. The ability to discern right from wrong has to be learned! We must come to learn what GOD says is right and what is wrong. That will often be different from the way that naturally seems to be right to us (see Proverbs 14:12; 16:25), because God's thoughts and God's ways are different from our thoughts and our ways (see Isaiah 55:8). And without learning what are the ways of God there cannot be any godly character development.

Next, we need to keep in mind that this process is not instantaneous; it requires time. As Mr. Armstrong wrote:

Page 260:

"As the human sperm cell is the very smallest of all human cells, even so, MANY NEWLY BEGOTTEN CHRISTIANS START OUT WITH A VERY SMALL MEASURE OF GOD'S HOLY SPIRIT AND CHARACTER. Many may still be, at first, about 99.44 percent carnal!" (my emphasis)

Page 261:

"The divine life has merely been begotten. THIS DIVINE CHARACTER STARTS SO VERY SMALL IT IS DOUBTFUL IF MUCH OF IT IS IN EVIDENCE -- except for the glow of that ecstasy of spiritual "romance" that we may radiate in that "first love" of conversion --spiritually speaking. But so far as spiritual knowledge and developed spiritual character goes, there is not much, as yet." (my emphasis)

Page 262:

"And as the physical fetus gradually, one by one, develops the physical organs, features and characteristics, EVEN SO THE BEGOTTEN CHRISTIAN MUST GRADUALLY, CONTINUALLY, DEVELOP THE SPIRITUAL CHARACTER--love, faith, patience, gentleness, temperance. He (or she) must live by, and be a doer of the Word of God. He must develop THE DIVINE CHARACTER!" (my emphasis)

When we die, the godly character we have developed is preserved. Mr. Armstrong explained it this way:

Page 110:

"The departed human spirit at death is in fact a spiritual mold, of itself unconscious, yet in the resurrection bringing into the resurrected body all the memory, knowledge and character as well as form and shape of the person before death."

Page 127:

"The spirit is the depository of memory and character. The spirit is like a mold. It retains even the human form and shape of the deceased, so that in the resurrection to judgment those who have died shall look as they did in life, retain whatever character they established in life, remember everything that was stored in their memory."

And then, at the time of the first resurrection, all those who have developed this godly character are resurrected or changed into spirit beings and they (i.e. WE) will rule with Christ throughout the millennium. As Mr. Armstrong put it:

Page 326:

"(In God's kingdom) all officials will be appointed--and by the divine Christ, who reads and knows men's hearts, their inner character, and abilities or lack of ability. You'll find a description of Christ's supernatural insight into the very character of others in Isaiah 11:2-5.

Notice it: "And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord; and shall make him of quick understanding . . . and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears [hearsay]: but with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth . . ." (Isaiah 11:2-4)."

Page 338:

"But, in every case, these kings and rulers will be resurrected immortals, born into the kingdom (family) of God as Spirit beings--not flesh-and-blood mortals. And, in every case, they will be those who qualified not only by conversion, but by overcoming, by spiritual character development, growth in Christ's knowledge--training in being ruled by God's law and government, as well as learning to rule."

As can be seen from these quotations, Mr. Armstrong had a lot to say about godly character. But let's now clarify one specific area.

IS CHARACTER REALLY "A GIFT" FROM GOD?

Mr. Armstrong explained that there are things WE ourselves must do in order for godly character to be developed in us; yet he also stated that such character was still "a gift" from God. How does this work? Let's ask some key questions.

Question: Does God actually give us "character"?

Answer: No!

Question: Then exactly what is it that God DOES give to us?

Answer: His Holy Spirit.

Question: What does God expect us to DO with this Holy Spirit He gives to us upon repentance and baptism?

Answer: God expects us to USE this gift in order to produce "fruits"! This is clear from the parable of the pounds (see Luke 19:12-24) and the parable of the talents (see Matthew 25:14-30). Christ also said very plainly ...

Herein is my Father glorified, THAT YE BEAR MUCH FRUIT; so shall ye be my disciples. (John 15:8)

Question: What happens when we use the Holy Spirit in the ways that God intended for us to use it?

Answer: Fruits are produced!

Question: What do those fruits look like?

Answer: The fruits that are produced are listed in Galatians 5:22-23 and they are known as "the fruits of the Spirit". They are: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance.

Question: So what are all of these "fruits" really?

Answer: They are all CHARACTER ATTRIBUTES!

Question: So exactly what is it that is produced when we use the Holy Spirit in our lives as God intended for us to do?

Answer: GODLY CHARACTER IS PRODUCED!

Question: So exactly what does God give us as far as character development is concerned?

Answer: God gives us two things ... THE MEANS to produce the fruits which equate to godly character and THE OPPORTUNITIES to put the means He has given us to good use. "The means" for producing character we refer to as "the gift of the Holy Spirit". "The opportunities" to use these means we refer to as "tests and trials".

Question: So where does our input in this process enter the picture?

Answer: God always gives us all only the same thing ... the raw building material, which He expects us to put to use in order to produce the fruits which will glorify Him. One person may use this raw building material (i.e. the gift of the Holy Spirit) in his life to produce the fruit of love; another person may use the same material to produce gentleness or meekness or faith. It depends on the "opportunities" we are given and how we respond to those opportunities.

[NOTE: I am here speaking about THE FRUITS of the Holy Spirit. I am NOT speaking about what is commonly referred to as "the gifts of the Holy Spirit", which are listed in 1 Corinthians chapter 12. It is actually more accurate to refer to the things in 1 Cor. 12 as "MANIFESTATIONS of the spirit".]

In practice all of these "fruits" overlap with one another. As the old song used to say: "You can't have one without the other". And you can't have one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit in isolation without also, TO SOME DEGREE, having the other eight fruits as well. It is just a matter that some of these fruits will be more prominent or more dominant in some people, while other fruits may be more dominant in other people. But there cannot be a true Christian who has "a total void" in any single one of these nine fruits of the Holy Spirit. Regarding one specific one of these fruits, faith, we read ...

BUT WITHOUT FAITH [IT IS] IMPOSSIBLE TO PLEASE [HIM]: ... (Hebrews 11:6)

Understand that this statement is equally true when applied to the other fruits of the Spirit! In other words ...

- WITHOUT LOVE it is impossible to please God;
- WITHOUT JOY it is impossible to please God;
- WITHOUT PEACE (as an attitude) it is impossible to please God;
- WITHOUT LONGSUFFERING it is impossible to please God;
- WITHOUT GENTLENESS it is impossible to please God;
- WITHOUT GOODNESS it is impossible to please God;
- WITHOUT MEEKNESS it is impossible to please God;
- WITHOUT TEMPERANCE it is impossible to please God.

To develop godly character, we must have all of these fruits to some degree, and possibly SOME of them to a greater degree.

Question: So what good does it do to ask God: "Please give me more of Your love. Please give me more meekness and temperance and patience so that I can become more like You already are."

Answer: Such requests are a waste of time! They amount to asking God to give us His ready-made character without us having to do anything ourselves.

Understand that God simply does NOT dish out ready-made fruits of His Spirit! That would amount to dishing out ready-made CHARACTER! And, as Mr. Armstrong explained, that is one thing God cannot create "instantly". God does not give to any of us ready-made fruits of His Spirit.

By very definition "fruits" are always something that is "PRODUCED" as a result of effort! Fruits come from something else ... from a tree that produced them. And the fruits of the Spirit are something which has been produced by the Holy Spirit.

God makes available to us His Holy Spirit. But it requires OUR INPUT, OUR ACTIVE HARD WORK, by the way we respond to life's tests and trials, to convert that Holy Spirit in our lives into godly love, into joy and peace and meekness and temperance. Now if God had not given us His Spirit to start with, then no amount of hard work would result in the fruits of God's Spirit being produced in our lives. We CANNOT work them up by our own efforts! If God does not initiate the process (by giving us His Spirit), then we never even get to first base! But once God has started the process by giving us His Spirit, then it is up to us to USE that Spirit to produce all of these fruits that make up godly character. That is OUR contribution in the process of developing godly character. We have to use what God makes available ... but some people only "bury" it.

Question: So what about "the love of God which is shed abroad in our hearts"?

Answer: Let's read the whole Scripture that is involved here.

And hope maketh not ashamed; because THE LOVE OF GOD is shed abroad in our hearts BY THE HOLY GHOST WHICH IS GIVEN UNTO US. (Romans 5:5)

Notice! Exactly what does this verse say is "given unto us"? Is it "the love of God"? Not really! What is given unto us is "THE HOLY SPIRIT OF GOD"! And that Holy Spirit is THE MEANS for producing the love of God in our lives. Well certainly! After all, the love of God is the very first of the nine fruits of this Spirit, as they are listed in Galatians chapter 5.

Question: Then why is the Holy Spirit called "a spirit of love"?

Answer: Let's again read the whole Scripture that is involved.

For God hath not given us THE SPIRIT of fear; but OF POWER, and OF LOVE, and OF A SOUND MIND. (2 Timothy 1:7)

The Holy Spirit which God gives to us at repentance is the very power of God! The things that power will produce in our lives include "love" and "a sound mind" ... BUT ONLY IF WE USE THAT SPIRIT! If we bury it (Matthew 25:18) or just lay it up in a napkin (Luke 19:20), then it will simply not produce anything at all! Understand that simply "HAVING" the Holy Spirit is not enough! It must be used by us to produce fruits!

We need to be careful that we do not read the Scriptures in a way that minimizes OUR OWN RESPONSIBILITY in the process of the development of godly character! That would amount to playing games with God!

Question: Can you make this whole question still clearer? I still don't think that I fully understand.

Answer: Alright, let's look at an analogy. Let's compare the free gift of God's Spirit to God giving you a gift of \$100 million. A vast sum of money! You then USE some of that money to buy a luxury mansion, cars, a boat, clothing, jewelry, food, appliances, etc. When an old friend then asks you: "How did you get this mansion you now live in?", you reply: "Oh, that is a gift God gave to me". Is that answer correct, or should you have said: "well, I bought this mansion"?

The first answer is certainly correct! The mansion is indeed a gift from God! The fact that you utilized some of the money God gave you and converted it into a mansion, does not really take away from the gift status of the mansion. What God did is VERY GREAT ... He gave you a vast fortune. What you did is VERY LITTLE ... you wrote a bank cheque for the cost price of the mansion. If you do not acknowledge the gift status of your mansion, you present a distorted picture, by implying that you bought it with money YOU had worked for and earned.

So yes, the love of God and joy and peace and longsuffering and gentleness and faith and all the other fruits of God's Spirit are "a gift from God" because God has given us His Holy Spirit, which is the means for producing all of these fruits. Compared to God's input, our contribution to the process is very little ... like writing out a cheque for some of the money we have received as a free, totally undeserved gift. But we DO have a part in the process. Without our active participation and our input the Holy Spirit will never be converted into love and joy and faith and meekness, etc..

Question: Can any of the fruits of God's Spirit actually exist OUTSIDE of a personal being? That is: can these fruits actually exist in the Holy Spirit itself?

Answer: NO!

Understand this!

There is no such thing as "a spirit of love" or "a spirit of joy" or "a spirit of meekness" or "a spirit of temperance" or "a spirit of gentleness" or "a spirit of faith" or "a spirit of longsuffering" or "a spirit of peace" or "a spirit of goodness" that can exist OUTSIDE OF A PERSONAL BEING! All of these "spirits" are attributes that characterize personal beings! These "spirits" don't exist somewhere out in space. They are all totally meaningless apart from when they are applied to a personal being. And they depend on how the mind of that personal being functions! These "spirits" (or "attitudes" or "frames of mind") all exist only within the conscious, active minds of personal beings.

When God gives us His Holy Spirit, He gives us THE MEANS for producing and developing these "spirits" within our minds. But for people who do not have God's Spirit it is utterly impossible to have the godly version of these "spirits". [We should recognize that there are human counterparts to all of these fruits of God's Spirit. Yet without God's Spirit people cannot really please God and they are not "God's people" (see Romans 8:8-9).]

So when we refer to godly character as "a gift from God", don't for one moment believe that God somehow dishes out ready-made godly character. Without your active and diligent participation godly character will never come into existence in your life!

Consider another analogy to illustrate this point.

Supposing God were to place you on a small tropical island, totally on your own and without any means to ever leave the island. God then gives you a treasure chest filled with pure gold and diamonds ... equivalent to the \$100 million we referred to earlier. There are fruit trees to sustain your life, but you are totally on your own. What use to you would that vast treasure be? It would be totally useless and worthless! You would not have any opportunities to put it to any profitable use. All you could do is bury it ... the way numerous well-known pirates are supposed to have done.

So when God does give us a priceless treasure (i.e. His Holy Spirit), then God ALSO gives us opportunities to derive value and benefits from that treasure. The opportunities are there ... but we ourselves have to make the effort to see them. Those are the opportunities that help us to convert the treasure into the attributes of a godly character.

DEFINITIONS OF "CHARACTER"

We've looked at how Mr. Armstrong defined "character" in his book. But now let's be sure we are clear on the way this word is defined in dictionaries. So let's look at Webster's Dictionary:

Definitions of "character" from Webster's Dictionary:

- a mark, distinctive quality, from the Greek word for "to scratch, to engrave";
- one of the attributes or features that make up and distinguish the individual;
- a person marked by notable or conspicuous traits;
- moral excellence and firmness;
- reputation.

In other words, "character" refers to the distinctive qualities and attributes that have been engraved or etched into our very being, traits that identify us, qualities that reveal what we are really like as individuals. And "godly character" refers to inculcating into our very being traits and characteristics that are associated with the nature of God! Godly character refers to becoming like God, as far as how our minds function and operate is concerned.

So note:

When we utilize God's Holy Spirit to develop godly character, then we are becoming like God; our minds will work along the same lines as God's mind. And then God will no longer say to us: "my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways". Rather, the ways of a person who has developed some godly character in his life are becoming more and more the same as the ways of God.

In the title of this paper I asked the question: "do we really have holy righteous godly character?" Let's now rephrase and expand that question a little bit. Now we are ready to squarely confront this subject. So here are the questions we need to ask ourselves:

ARE WE BECOMING LIKE GOD IN THE WAY WE THINK? DO WE VIEW OUR LIVES AND EVERYTHING IN THEM AS GOD VIEWS IT? DO WE EVALUATE OUR OWN CONDUCT ... THE THINGS WE DO, THE THINGS WE SAY AND THE WAY WE DRESS AND GROOM OURSELVES ... THE WAY GOD EVALUATES OUR CONDUCT? DO WE APPROVE OF THE THINGS GOD APPROVES OF? AND DO WE SHOW DISAPPROVAL FOR THE THINGS GOD

DISAPPROVES OF?

IF WE CAN ANSWER "YES" TO THESE QUESTIONS, THEN WE ARE INDEED DEVELOPING GODLY CHARACTER! BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT GODLY CHARACTER IS ALL ABOUT ... SEEING EVERYTHING FROM GOD'S POINT OF VIEW!

You are familiar with Paul's instruction to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 13:5 ...

EXAMINE YOURSELVES, whether ye be in the faith; PROVE YOUR OWN SELVES. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? (2 Corinthians 13:5)

The principle expressed in this verse certainly also applies to developing godly character. So let's paraphrase this verse with the focus on godly character. Here it is ...

"Examine yourselves, whether you are indeed developing godly character. Prove your own selves. Don't you yourselves know that you MUST be in the process of developing godly character, unless you are reprobates?"

Recall again the quotation from page 201 of Mr. Armstrong's book.

Page 201:

"Those called into the Church were called not merely for salvation and eternal life, but TO LEARN THE WAY OF GOD'S GOVERNMENT AND DEVELOP THE DIVINE CHARACTER during this mortal life in the Church age." (my emphasis)

So let's examine ourselves.

THE GREATEST BARRIER TO REAL GODLY CHARACTER

There are many things that can become barriers and obstacles to the development of real godly character. We'll take a look at some of the more common ones as we go along. But there is one thing that is a solid and impenetrable steel wall, one that absolutely separates us from God and therefore from the opportunity to develop a godly character. That one thing is ...

A LACK OF REAL REPENTANCE!

It is utterly impossible for anyone who is not really repentant to develop any aspect of godly character. This is because the unrepentant mind is hostile to God and His ways (see Romans 8:7).

This principle also applies to us who are a part of God's true Church. If we commit a sin, any sin, which we don't acknowledge, which we want to pretend that it does not exist, then we are in danger of losing the godly character that has been developed in our lives up to that point in time.

This was the danger King David was in after his sin with Bathsheba and after he had killed Uriah, her husband. By the time Bathsheba was ready to give birth to the child, David wanted nothing more fervently than to have his sins forgotten, swept under the carpet, blotted out as past tense, something he

never intended to do again. Of course, David was sorry that Uriah had had to be killed in a very treacherous way; but that was all past tense and David was from now on going to always be "a good guy".

But David had NEVER yet confessed to God and really repented of his evil deeds. He had just pretended that nothing was wrong; after all, soldiers do sometimes get killed in warfare. So in His mercy God confronted David through the prophet Nathan. And David freely confessed and repented.

During those approximately nine months, from the time David committed adultery until Bathsheba gave birth to the baby, David did NOT in any way increase in godly character. During that period of time David's character diminished to some degree in God's sight. Had David not repented, then not only would he have lost whatever godly character he still had, but he also would have died! This should be clear from 2 Samuel 12:13.

And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; THOU SHALT NOT DIE. (2 Samuel 12:13 AV)

David's repentance opened the way to again resume the process of developing godly character in his life. The period of stagnation was over, brought to an end by genuine repentance.

The same principle holds true for us. If there is ANY sin in our lives, which we pretend does not exist, which we knowingly try to ignore or overlook, which we justify and rationalize as acceptable or at least as "permissible", then that sin will become that absolute barrier to the development of godly character. God is not mocked, and God is not fooled!

The principles that underlie this example of David committing adultery with Bathsheba can be applied to many other situations as well. The point is that a lack of real repentance is the greatest barrier of all to the development of godly character. And a scheming mind is the antithesis of godly character. We are dealing with the great God who discerns every single thought and intent of our hearts.

For THE WORD OF GOD [is] quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and [IS] A DISCERNER OF THE THOUGHTS AND INTENTS OF THE HEART. (Hebrews 4:12)

God always knows WHY we do the things we do!

So an unrepentant attitude is the greatest barrier to the development of godly character. But let's now look at a few other factors that can have a negative impact on godly character.

THE BIBLICAL DEFINITIONS OF "SIN"

Committing sin is the opposite of developing godly character. By carefully examining how God defines sin for us, we can come to very clearly see the things that destroy godly character. In the New Testament we find several different definitions for sin. They are all complementary. Some are objective definitions, which are always applicable. Others are subjective definitions, depending on the circumstances and the people involved and their degree of understanding.

Let's look at some of these definitions and see what they reveal about godly character.

1 JOHN 3:4 AND 1 JOHN 5:17

Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for SIN IS THE TRANSGRESSION OF THE LAW. (1 John 3:4)

ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS IS SIN: and there is a sin not unto death. (1 John 5:17)

These two definitions are objective and impartial. Breaking God's laws, even when we don't know those laws, is sin. Ignorance of the laws of God may sometimes diminish the penalty (the principle of Luke 12:47-48), but ignorance does not remove the binding effect of God's laws. God's laws are just as much in force when we are fully aware of them as they are when we are ignorant of them.

How does this impact on character-development?

When we break God's laws, even unknowingly, then we are obviously not developing any godly character. If we break God's laws KNOWINGLY, then we are destroying whatever godly character we may have built before that point in time.

Let's look at some specific examples.

There are many people who attended God's Church prior to December 1994, the time when the late Mr. Joseph W. Tkach claimed that God's laws are not binding on Christians. Until then these people had tried their best, with God's help, to live by all of God's laws. In the process they had faced tests and trials, and in that way they had developed a certain amount of godly character. They were not really looking for anyone to tell them that God's laws are done away.

But then along came Mr. Tkach and told them that God's laws had been "a terrible taskmaster". Suddenly Mr. Tkach offered them "an easier way". They had been quite prepared to forego the things that other people do on Saturdays; they had been quite prepared to sacrifice in order to tithe faithfully; they had been quite prepared to uncompromisingly reject this world's pagan customs; etc.. But when Mr. Tkach suddenly offered them this "easier way", then many people accepted Mr. Tkach's offer. They stopped tithing faithfully because that seemed to be a burden. They started to break the Sabbath because they had (supposedly) been unnecessarily restricted by the harsh Sabbath rules. They started to show acceptance of pagan customs in order to gain the favour and approval of friends and relatives.

AND ALL THE GODLY CHARACTER SUCH PEOPLE HAD EVER DEVELOPED BEFORE THAT TIME HAS TOTALLY DISAPPEARED! IT IS AS THOUGH THEY HAD NEVER POSSESSED ANY GODLY CHARACTER IN THE FIRST PLACE!

Does that seem harsh? Well, it is the truth, and God is not playing any games with such people. Notice what God has to say:

Again, WHEN A RIGHTEOUS [MAN] DOTH TURN FROM HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND COMMIT INIQUITY, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, HE SHALL DIE IN HIS SIN, AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS WHICH HE HATH DONE SHALL NOT BE REMEMBERED; but his blood will I require at thine hand. (Ezekiel 3:20)

Present sins have the effect of totally erasing our past good record. Think about this ... the benefits of twenty or thirty years of faithful and dedicated service to God are totally wiped out by just two perverse sermons from Mr. Tkach! And for those sermons God took Mr. Tkach's life. He died a few short months

after giving those sermons. The stakes couldn't be higher!

And notice further:

But WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS TURNETH AWAY FROM HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND COMMITTETH INIQUITY, [and] doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked [man] doeth, shall he live? ALL HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT HE HATH DONE SHALL NOT BE MENTIONED: IN HIS TRESPASS THAT HE HATH TRESPASSED, AND IN HIS SIN THAT HE HATH SINNED, IN THEM SHALL HE DIE. (Ezekiel 18:24)

These are the words of God! They reveal the mind of God to us! The reason why before God all past righteousness is blotted out when we, later in life, turn from such righteous conduct is because our character has changed ... FOR THE WORSE! All past good deeds and conduct become meaningless when we lose the character that had been built by those good deeds. Wrong conduct very easily destroys good character!

And notice the same point again:

When I shall say to THE RIGHTEOUS, [that] he shall surely live; IF HE TRUST TO HIS OWN RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND COMMIT INIQUITY, ALL HIS RIGHTEOUSNESSES SHALL NOT BE REMEMBERED; BUT FOR HIS INIQUITY THAT HE HATH COMMITTED, HE SHALL DIE FOR IT. (Ezekiel 33:13)

WHEN THE RIGHTEOUS TURNETH FROM HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND COMMITTETH INIQUITY, HE SHALL EVEN DIE THEREBY. (Ezekiel 33:18)

With God sinners get no credit for past good deeds! People don't think that is fair, and so they say "the way of the Lord is not equal" (Ezekiel 33:20). But do WE understand the mind of God? Or are we also one of those people who, when they are caught in their transgression, try to appeal to their PAST good deeds to justify themselves? Do we also play that game?

You know the game, because you have surely played it at some time in the past, even as I have, right? It goes something like this:

"Yes, I have done something wrong. BUT look at all the good things I have done IN THE PAST!! And look at the things that YOU have also done that are wrong! Even if I am in some way punished for my present wrong deed or deeds, I DEMAND credit and recognition for my past good actions and behaviour!"

Does that sound like a familiar melody?

God doesn't accept that line of reasoning. For a start, it is utterly selfish. It tries to minimize the present reality by an appeal to the past. And God does not accept that. But do we understand WHY God does not accept that line of reasoning?

When we do what is right, then right character is formed. The longer we do what is right and the more whole-heartedly we do it, the firmer that character becomes. But when we then approve of things that are wrong; when we accept wrong ways and we sin, then that godly character is destroyed ... IT JUST DISAPPEARS! The good character we had developed no longer exists ... destroyed by sins.

THEREFORE it is utterly meaningless to appeal to past good deeds which produced good character, but which good character has now disappeared. Can we understand this? Or do we also feel that "the way of the Lord is not equal"?

Let's now look at another definition of sin.

ROMANS 14:23

And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because [he eateth] not of faith: FOR WHATSOEVER [IS] NOT OF FAITH IS SIN. (Romans 14:23)

This is a subjective definition of sin ... it depends to some degree on what we understand. But it depends especially on the convictions we personally hold. The point in this verse is this:

IT IS ALWAYS A SIN TO COMPROMISE OUR CONSCIENCE!

How does this affect godly character?

When we show approval for something that we in our own mind feel is wrong, then we are destroying a part of our real character! This is the case even when the thing we personally feel is wrong isn't actually wrong at all in the sight of God. We will have compromised our conscience (even if our conscience happens to be wrong in that particular case) and that compromise has the effect of destroying character. It doesn't make a difference whether we show this approval (for something our innermost feelings tell us is wrong) by our actions (doing the thing ourselves) or only by our words (voicing acceptance or approval for something other people are doing). Compromise always destroys character!

We live in a lawless and violent world, not unlike the way things were in the days of Noah. Lawlessness is the order of the day. This is abundantly evident, even as Christ predicted in Matthew 24:12. How much does it rub off on us?

Remember how much the lawless and perverse society in which Lot lived rubbed off on the man Lot? The account of Lot is found in Genesis chapter 19. Yes, Lot really was still trying to live the right way before God. But his standards had also been severely compromised in the process. Indications of this are that first Lot actually offered his two virgin daughters to a wild mob so that they might gang-rape his daughters (verse 8), and then, when it was made clear to him that Sodom was about to be destroyed on God's instructions (verse 13), then he was reluctant to leave this perverse society behind (verse 16).

Did Lot know that what people in Sodom did was wrong? Certainly! The Apostle Peter tells us that Lot "vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds" (2 Peter 2:7-8). Yet he couldn't bring himself to leave that society behind. There is a lesson for us in this.

This definition, that whatsoever is not of faith is sin, highlights two different approaches to life. These two approaches affect the things we do and the things we show approval or acceptance for.

Approach #1: We try to find out what God may "ALLOW" us to do. This applies to all those things where we don't have a clear-cut statement saying: "you shall NOT ... (do the thing we are considering doing)". This approach then reasons as follows: "well, I know there is no clearly stated approval from God for what I want to do; BUT as long as there is no clear-cut prohibition in the Bible for this thing, we can safely assume that God actually ALLOWS us to do this. Otherwise God would have made His disapproval clear by forbidding us to do this thing." Note: this approach interprets a lack of specific

disapproval from God to imply that God does approve of something.

Approach #2: We try to find out what is actually PLEASING IN THE SIGHT OF GOD. This also applies to the things where we don't have any clear-cut prohibitions. But this approach will not view the specific subject in question in isolation, all by itself, or "just on its own merits". Rather, this approach will view every single question from the perspective of the entire and complete revelation of God. Every single biblical statement that gives us an insight into the mind of God will be taken into consideration in reaching a judgment. This approach will reason as follows:

"Yes, I understand that there is no specific command in the Bible that forbids me to do what I am considering doing. But I want to understand the mind of God. It is not enough for me to know that God has not specifically forbidden this thing. I want to know whether it is actually PLEASING to God if I do this thing. I want to "walk with God" even as Enoch, Noah and Abraham "walked with God"; and that is only possible if I am fully in agreement with God (see Amos 3:3). So is God actually going to be PLEASED with me if I do this thing or is He NOT going to be pleased with me? And if I can see that something is not going to be pleasing to God, then I will simply not do it, even if there is no specific command not to do so." Note: this approach interprets a lack of specific approval from God as a reason to proceed very cautiously. This approach searches for principles that reveal God's thinking.

A few weeks ago I wrote an article entitled "Seeking God's Will About Make-up". It was the process of writing that paper which forcefully brought these two different approaches to mind. It is so plain to see that the people in the Church who approve of make-up are tied to "approach #1"; their only justification is to reason from an absence of any specific prohibition against make-up. But Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong, in his judgment on this question, reasoned from "approach #2"; a desire to genuinely understand God's will and God's preferences. It is only the people who use "approach #2" that can actually "walk with God".

What has all this got to do with Romans 14:23?

"Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" means that we ONLY do those things where we are absolutely sure of God's APPROVAL! We must have faith in God's approval! When all we have to base our decision on is an absence of specific disapproval for our contemplated actions, then there cannot be any FAITH! There is only insecurity and uncertainty, but no faith! When we have not made any effort to earnestly seek out exactly what it is that is PLEASING in God's sight ... how can we possibly have faith that God will approve of our actions? When our motivation is to seek the approval of the world (as is the case with the use of make-up!); when our motivation is to follow the ways of people who are totally deceived by Satan (see Rev. 12:9) and who are being controlled by Satan (see 2 Cor. 4:4) ... how can we POSSIBLY have faith that our actions are pleasing to God?

You know 1 John 3:22, right?

And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, BECAUSE WE keep his commandments, and DO THOSE THINGS THAT ARE PLEASING IN HIS SIGHT. (1 John 3:22)

"Approach #1" above is one of the games people play ... even in God's Church ... yes, even ministers sometimes play this game. That's rather sad, because that is a character-destroying game.

Understand something about the God who gave you life and who offers you eternal life in His presence.

God is not really interested in our mechanical obedience to Him. God is not impressed by our obedience to all of the things we absolutely "HAVE TO DO", because He has specifically commanded us to do so. If all we do is what we "HAVE TO DO", then before God we are nothing more than "unprofitable servants",

right?

So likewise ye, WHEN YE SHALL HAVE DONE ALL THOSE THINGS WHICH ARE COMMANDED YOU, SAY, WE ARE UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS: WE HAVE DONE [ONLY] THAT WHICH WAS OUR DUTY TO DO. (Luke 17:10)

So God says to us:

"Yes, I know that you will try to obey Me if I spell out specific commandments to you. That's the bare minimum that I expect from My creation. And if I wanted to, I could FORCE you to obey Me. So your obedience to clearly stated commandments is fine, but that isn't what I am looking for in you. What I really want to know about you is: are you yourself really desirous of becoming like I am? Do you yourself WANT to have a mind that thinks like MY mind thinks? Are you yourself really interested in MY preferences and MY likes? And are you desirous of inculcating and incorporating MY likes and MY preferences into your own very being? Or will you only do that if I force you to do so? Are you voluntarily desirous of being in harmony with the way I think? Can I REALLY trust you?"

Without this approach we will not develop any godly character!

SEARCHING THE BIBLE FOR THE THINGS GOD WILL "ALLOW"

Sometimes people want to do something that may, possibly, be not fully correct in the sight of God. People then say something like: "Let's look in the Bible to see if this is something God approves of".

THIS APPROACH IN ITSELF MAY ALREADY PRESENT A BIT OF A PROBLEM!

You don't understand why this approach could be a problem? Does my statement seem harsh or self-righteous? Alright, then let me explain it.

When we START OUT with something WE want to do, then we have a problem! The problem is that we are NOT really looking for "God's will"; we are really only looking to see whether or not God will show approval for, or at least "accept", OUR WILL! So we are going to search the Bible with a specific motive ... that motive being to find approval for what we, deep-down, would like to do. This influences the way our minds approach our search for "God's will". We are biased in favour of wanting to find approval.

And you know what happens in those cases, don't you?

That's right! We will find approval for the thing we want to do! It always works! Oh, sometimes we have to reach our destination by way of a few detours and deviations ... but don't worry, we'll get there. We'll find a way to do what we want to do and to have what we want to have.

BUT WE WON'T BE DEVELOPING ANY GODLY CHARACTER!

The correct approach to have is as follows. We should say:

"Lord, I honestly don't have any preferences of my own in this matter. My only desire is to understand, as accurately as possible, what YOUR desires and preferences in this matter are.

YOUR wish, Lord, is my command. It also doesn't matter to me whether other people will agree with YOUR preferences or not. I couldn't care less about what other people will think. And so I would like to know what YOU, Lord, feel about make-up. Would YOU, Lord, want me to wear it or to approve of its use or not? Show me YOUR preferences. Would YOU, Lord, like me to be involved in this or in that activity on Your Sabbath days? Please show me. How would YOU, Lord, like me to handle the matter of tithing in my specific circumstances? Please show me. etc. ..."

This is the approach of coming to God without any kind of agenda. This approach says: I want to learn to think like You do, God. I want to have Your mind guiding me. I want to reject Satan's ways and Satan's influence. I want to walk with You. Please help me and lead me.

Let's have a look at an example of searching the Bible to see whether or not God will approve of something we would like to do. You are probably already familiar with the account.

THE LESSON OF BALAAM

Balak, the king of Moab, offered the pagan prophet Balaam a huge amount of money if he would curse Israel. Balaam really wanted the money! But when Balaam consulted God ...

And God said unto Balaam, THOU SHALT NOT GO WITH THEM; thou shalt not curse the people: for they [are] blessed. (Numbers 22:12)

God's will is pretty clear: God said DON'T GO! Nobody can possibly say that God's will here was ambiguous!

But Balak increased his offer and sent more messengers to Balaam. Now Balaam KNEW God's will already! But he really wanted all that money. And so he said to these messengers ...

Now therefore, I pray you, tarry ye also here this night, THAT I MAY KNOW WHAT THE LORD WILL SAY UNTO ME MORE. (Numbers 22:19)

[This is somewhat the way we are when we deep-down KNOW that God really is not pleased with something we would like to do. We then say: "I just want to make a really, REALLY thorough study of this subject so I can be sure of God's will. I know that, ON THE SURFACE, it appears like God disapproves of what I want to do. But MAYBE I can find something, somewhere, that will reverse the obvious disapproval that seems to be expressed in the verses we have looked at thus far. PERHAPS there are extenuating circumstances under which God will actually "ALLOW" what I would like to do."]

And so Balaam reasoned: maybe God will let me go ... so I can GET all that money! Balaam wasn't really looking for God's will. He was only looking for approval for his own will! So notice God's response.

And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him, If the men come to call thee, RISE UP, [AND] GO WITH THEM; but yet the word which I shall say unto thee, that shalt thou do. (Numbers 22:20)

[This is when we finally stumble across that magic verse which, with the help of a dozen commentaries and Hebrew and Greek dictionaries, we are able to panelbeat (a South African expression which means "to hammer into shape") into an expression of God's approval for what we have wanted to do all along.

We "knew" there just had to be a verse like this somewhere in the Bible.]

Back to Balaam: Those words "rise up and go with them" were music to Balaam's ears. Those were the words he had longed to hear. BUT WAS THIS GOD'S WILL? No, it wasn't! But Balaam wasn't interested in God's will; he just wanted approval for his own will.

So Balaam hardly slept and in the morning he was off to get his hands on all the money Balak was offering him! (Verse 21)

Now notice the next verse!

AND GOD'S ANGER WAS KINDLED BECAUSE HE WENT: and the angel of the LORD stood in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants [were] with him. (Numbers 22:22)

DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE MIND OF GOD?

You could ask the question: "How could God possibly be angry with Balaam, when God Himself had said 'rise up and go with them'?" Was it fair for God to be angry?

We need to understand this because God deals in exactly the same way with US!

When we really sincerely want to know God's will on something, then God will let us know. But if we are not happy with the answer God gives us, then it clearly shows that our desire is not really for knowing God's will; our desire is really to have approval for our own will.

Therefore if we ask God AGAIN because we weren't happy with the answer we received the first time round, God may just give us the answer we want ... AND THEN BE ANGRY WITH US WHEN WE DO WHAT WE WANTED APPROVAL FOR!

This incident with Balaam is recorded to show us how God's mind works! Understand this! We are no different from Balaam when we seek God's approval for something we have already set our heart on!

Oh yes, we may SAY: "All I want to know is what God REALLY says about this matter". But if we have ALREADY set our heart on one particular answer, then we don't really want God's will ... we are really hoping to receive approval for our will. And God may just give us that excuse to do what we want to do ... and then punish us!

Understand that how God dealt with Balaam reveals how God will deal with you and with me. God is not a respecter of persons.

Let's continue with Balaam's story. God had sent an angel "with his sword drawn in his hand" ...

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face. (Numbers 22:31)

The reason for the drawn sword?

And the angel of the LORD said unto him ... BECAUSE [THY] WAY IS PERVERSE BEFORE ME: (Numbers 22:32)

Yet a carnal mind could ARGUE that up to that point Balaam was only following God's instructions ... God had said: GO! But God didn't see it that way! God saw it as selfish and "perverse"!

Knowing that he could already have been killed by God, Balaam was now a little subdued and admitted that he had sinned ...

And Balaam said unto the angel of the LORD, I HAVE SINNED; FOR I KNEW NOT that thou stoodest in the way against me: now therefore, IF IT DISPLEASE THEE, I will get me back again. (Numbers 22:34)

However, if you read this verse carefully, you can see that he only admitted to having sinned in the matter of hitting his donkey three times ... "because I didn't know that You were standing in the way to kill me". He did not admit that he had sinned in deciding to go to Balak.

Don't be fooled by the words "I have sinned"! He is still not confessing to the REAL problem ... his greed for money! Are we sometimes like this when we are in deep trouble? You know, willing to confess to some minor point, while still totally unrepentant about the real problem? Sure you are! We have all done this type of thing at one time or another. I have.

But God is not fooled!

The question "IF it displease you, I will get me back again" makes very clear that Balaam was still totally unrepentant, in spite of using the words "I have sinned". Can you understand this? Right at the very start God had told him very clearly not to go. When he did go, God nearly killed him in three different places. What do you mean ... "IF IT DISPLEASE YOU"??

But that is exactly the way our minds, mine included, work when we are desperately looking for approval for something we really want to do or to have.

Balaam was greedy. And he desperately wanted approval for his own will, while giving the appearance that he was just seeking the will of God. This attitude cost Balaam his life (Numbers 31:8). Let's beware lest we ourselves get caught up in this "error of Balaam" (Jude 1:11).

Looking to God for approval for our will is an expression of selfishness, and it will destroy real godly character. So beware of this attitude.

Consider what God tells us about our minds, when we really want something desperately:

The heart [is] deceitful above all [things], and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

We used to quote this verse quite regularly in the 60's and the 70's. Obviously, just quoting this verse is not enough; we need to really UNDERSTAND what it tells us about our own minds. But are you familiar with the next verse?

Verse 9 is a statement of fact. That's just the way it is. And BECAUSE this is the way it is (i.e. the heart is deceitful), THEREFORE God tells us in the next verse how He deals with such deceitful hearts. Notice

...

I the LORD search the heart, [I] TRY THE REINS, even TO GIVE EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS WAYS, [AND] ACCORDING TO THE FRUIT OF HIS DOINGS. (Jeremiah 17:10)

God knows that human hearts are deceitful and devious. So HOW does God "search" and "try" such hearts? One way God tests us is by GIVING us exactly what we are striving after and what we so desperately want to have! Did you know that?

Whenever there is anything we seek ahead of "the kingdom of God", then God obviously knows this. God knows this when we openly pursue this top priority in our lives ; and God knows it if we disguise this top priority to make it appear as if it was far less important to us than the kingdom of God. God always knows exactly WHY we do the things we do.

In many cases God will allow people to "GET" the things they really strive after. For example:

- if we really set your heart on becoming rich ...
- if we really want to get a different wife or husband ...
- if we really want a position of authority and prestige ...
- if we really want to go with Balak's messengers ...

God may just allow us to get what we have set our heart on!

That is God's way of testing us ... to give us according to our ways. That is probably the best way to teach us that what we so zealously set our heart on isn't really going to give us what we thought it would give us. It is somewhat like the song "If I Were a Rich Man" from the play "Fiddler on the Roof". We imagine that the things we set our hearts on will give us happiness and contentment and peace and satisfaction, but they don't give us these things. Very often once we actually get the things we had wanted so badly, they end up giving us problems we hadn't even thought of. Balaam never anticipated the problems he would have as a result of going with Balak's messengers.

When we seek to have our will approved by God, we end up destroying godly character.

Right, let's now look at another definition of sin.

JAMES 4:17

Therefore TO HIM THAT KNOWETH TO DO GOOD, AND DOETH [IT] NOT, TO HIM IT IS SIN.
(James 4:17)

This is obviously a very subjective definition of sin. It depends on what we understand. Knowledge and understanding always bring accountability with them. The more we know, the more accountable we are.

This principle has a MAJOR impact on the development of godly character.

Since no other person can see into our minds, when we are confronted with why we haven't done something that we really should have done, we can always claim ignorance. "Oh, I didn't know ..." is a

common justification. There will be times when we really didn't know; and there will in all likelihood also be times when we use this approach as an excuse.

Not doing the things we know we should do destroys godly character! Assuming we have reasonable health, we KNOW that we should fast more than just once or twice a year. But it is difficult to find times that are really convenient for fasting. And the months just seem to fly by. We are sure that it was just the other week that we fasted ... but it is actually almost a year ago.

We know we should pray and study the Bible regularly, but there are so many other demands on our time. And so sometimes we don't pray and study as regularly as we should.

We know many things that we should do in many different circumstances, but it just doesn't always work out that we do exactly what we should do. Our consciences will keep the score for a while; but after a while certain sins of omission will no longer bother our consciences; after a while those omissions are just "not a big deal" because we have accepted a new standard.

Let's try to see it from God's point of view. He is in the process of creating a family of beings who will all KNOW what is right, who will all know and understand His mind perfectly, who will all know exactly how God expects them to behave and the things He will expect them to do. If there were any members in that family who would neglect to do the things they know they really SHOULD do, then God cannot depend on them.

It is interesting to note that the wicked servant in both, the parable of the talents (Matthew 25) and the parable of the pounds (Luke 19), was guilty of sins of omission ... he did absolutely NOTHING when he really knew better. He didn't do the good he knew he should have done. Someone who neglects to do the things he knows he really should do is just as unreliable as the person who openly transgresses specific instructions.

Neglecting to do the good our consciences tell us we should be doing is a character flaw all of us have to face and come to grips with! Let's face it: we've all actively transgressed God's laws at one time or another. So how much easier and more likely is that we also neglect to sometimes do the good we really know we should be doing? Oh yes, we had valid excuses why we didn't do the good our consciences told us we should do, probably not unlike those in Luke chapter 14 ... we had just bought a piece of ground and needed to go and inspect it, or we had just bought five yoke of oxen and needed to go out and test them, or we had just gotten married and were about to leave for our honeymoon, or (see verses 18-20). Our minds are expert at providing us with vast arrays of excuses at a moment's notice. That's what Paul tells us in Romans 2:15 ...

Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, THEIR CONSCIENCE ALSO BEARING WITNESS, and [THEIR] THOUGHTS THE MEAN WHILE ACCUSING OR ELSE EXCUSING ONE ANOTHER;) (Romans 2:15)

Paul here highlighted the two things we so readily do in our own minds: we ACCUSE other people and find fault with them, and we EXCUSE ourselves and our own conduct. But our conscience is not fooled. And God reads our every thought.

So, when we compromise our conscience and neglect to do the good we know we really should do, we are destroying godly character.

Let's look at one more definition of sin.

JAMES 2:9

But IF YE HAVE RESPECT TO PERSONS, YE COMMIT SIN, and are convinced of the law as transgressors. (James 2:9)

Having "respect for persons" is an attitude, a way of thinking. This definition of sin makes clear that wrong attitudes are sin just as much as wrong actions!

It is a very common thing in our society to give preferential treatment to the rich and the famous. We help them and encourage them "to jump the queue", whereas we insist that the poor and the needy "wait their turn". That is what James had explained in the preceding verses.

This attitude is a sin and a character destroyer!

God is not a respecter of persons. God has no favourites. Israelites don't get any special treatment over non-Israelites. Men don't get any special treatment over women. Free people don't get any special treatment over bond-slaves. Before God every single human being is assessed on his or her own merits.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

We think selfishly, but God is totally impartial. We favour our own group, our own team, our own nationality or race, but God is absolutely impartial. It is a person's ATTITUDE that God looks at, not his ancestry or his looks or status or intellect.

For all those [things] hath mine hand made, and all those [things] have been, saith the LORD: but TO THIS [MAN] WILL I LOOK, [EVEN] TO [HIM THAT IS] POOR AND OF A CONTRITE SPIRIT, AND TREMBLETH AT MY WORD. (Isaiah 66:2)

We easily judge by appearances. Outward appearances easily impress us. But God looks past those outward appearances at the heart.

But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for [the LORD seeth] not as man seeth; FOR MAN LOOKETH ON THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE, BUT THE LORD LOOKETH ON THE HEART. (1 Samuel 16:7)

We read the Bible selfishly! We think that the best and most important positions in God's kingdom are reserved for "us Philadelphian Christians". Yes, the Christians from the other six eras will also be there; but they are certainly not going to be "pillars in the temple of my God" like we are going to be. WE are the really important era and everything revolves around US! We feel we are so important to God that God forms us into a perfect group of exactly 144000. None of the other six eras consist of a perfect number, but then they are also not as important as we are! We feel that God is more concerned about us Philadelphian Christians forming a perfect number of 144000, than He is about THE ENTIRE GROUP who will make up the first resurrection. We really act like we, the Philadelphian era, are God's favourite son! We selfishly claim Revelation 3:12 as a reward that applies exclusively to our era, something we are not prepared to share with the other people who will also be in the first resurrection. And we are WRONG in all these thoughts.

GOD IS NOT A RESPECTER OF PERSONS!

Developing godly character involves learning to think like God thinks. This means we have to learn to stop thinking selfishly! Selfishness is contrary to godly character. Showing partiality towards people is a form of selfishness. And selfishness is sin! And sin destroys real character.

Well, we've now looked at a few biblical definitions of sin. And it makes no difference according to which of those definitions we sin ... the result is always the same. Sinning destroys godly character! This is also true for when we break God's commandments. Whether we break the first commandment or the second or the third or ... the tenth; the result is always that character is destroyed in the process. And so James wrote ...

For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and YET OFFEND IN ONE [POINT], HE IS GUILTY OF ALL. (James 2:10)

All it takes is for us to sin in one area and godly character will be destroyed. That is true even if we are faithfully obedient in every other area of life.

Let me be specific here.

A) Two people who live together without being married will not develop any godly character ... even if they diligently keep the Sabbath and the Holy Days and tithe faithfully and give generous offerings on top of that. The development of godly character will only start after these two people have either married or separated.

B) Someone who is prepared to "occasionally" work on the Sabbath will not develop any godly character ... even if he prays and studies and fasts and faithfully tithes. The development of godly character will only start once the person has made a mental commitment that he simply will not break the Sabbath by working.

C) A person who is knowingly compromising in ANY AREA OF HIS CHRISTIAN LIFE will not develop any godly character ... even if he is extremely faithful and diligent in every other area of his life.

WE CANNOT BARGAIN WITH ALMIGHTY GOD!

It doesn't do any good to come to God and say: "Lord, I am absolutely faithful and diligently seek to please You in ALL of these areas of my life. I make sacrifices and I serve Your people with zeal. There is just this one small, tiny area of my life where I know that I am not obeying You or where I know that I am not really doing what is pleasing in Your sight. But it is such a small transgression and such an insignificant area of life. To focus on this small weakness of mine is nothing more than 'majoring in the minors'. I am doing everything that I know is really IMPORTANT to You. And even though I am not dealing with this small weakness in my life, I hope You will give me credit for all of the important ways in which I am obeying You. The fact is that in all of those important areas I am probably the most zealous person in the whole congregation ... and our pastor has even acknowledged this in conversations with other people."

God's answer will simply be James 2:10 and Ezekiel 3:20 and Ezekiel 18:24 and Ezekiel 33:13,18. God doesn't play games!

D) People who learn about God's laws, but because of circumstances (e.g. working on the Sabbath, etc.)

never make a total commitment will not develop any godly character. They may even give large sums of money to the Church and become prominent "co-workers" ... but they will not develop any godly character.

With God there is no such thing as a person being "CALLED BY GOD TO BE ONLY A CO-WORKER IN THIS PRESENT AGE"! What we have referred to as "co-worker status" is most assuredly NOT "a calling from God". "The calling" from God has to do with becoming a member of the Church of God. There is no calling from God for any status short of membership of the Church!

[NOTE: I am NOT speaking about a person who first becomes a co-worker and then, as he learns more about God's ways, is baptized into the Church. As a transitional phase, the co-worker status is perfectly acceptable and also desirable. I am speaking about people who read the Church's literature and agree with the Church's teachings, but are never willing to make a total commitment to God. Their commitment is limited to giving money, perhaps even very generously. Their willingness to contribute financially, yet not make a total commitment, is not "a calling" from God. God "calls" people to be a part of His Church. Going no further than becoming financial contributors is how some people have chosen to RESPOND to God's offer to be a part of His Church.]

Our claim that God "CALLS" some people to be "ONLY" co-workers in this age is a classic illustration of us being "respecters of persons"! Because people have given us money, THEREFORE we want to make them feel good and imply that they have a special status with God. And we are willing to "EXCUSE THEM" (Romans 2:15 again). The fact is that in most cases those people know very well that they are holding back from making a total commitment.

They may be quite willing to make a financial commitment, but they hold back in some other area. Regarding people in this type of situation, God tells us ...

Now the just shall live by faith: BUT IF [ANY MAN] DRAW BACK, MY SOUL SHALL HAVE NO PLEASURE IN HIM. (Hebrews 10:38)

The Greek verb here translated as "draw back" is "huposteiletai", the Aorist tense, middle voice and subjunctive mood of "hupostello". Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament mentions that, in the middle voice, this verb means:

"to withdraw one's self, i.e. to be timid, to cower, shrink: of those who from timidity hesitate to avow what they believe; to be unwilling to utter from fear, to shrink from declaring."

In plain terms, when people start to see the truth of God, when it starts to make sense to them and they agree with it, then, IF FOR ANY REASON THEY HOLD BACK FROM MAKING A TOTAL COMMITMENT, then God says in this verse: "My soul shall have no pleasure in him". But if that person has continued to give money to God's Church, then WE have often said: "well, God has ONLY called this person to be a co-worker in this present age".

We need to very clearly understand that people who in any way hold back in any area of their lives from making an unconditional commitment to God, simply cannot develop godly character.

And as far as "co-worker status" being "a calling from God" is concerned, the idea is ridiculous! "Co-workers" who never progress to member status are simply not going to be in the first resurrection. How can anybody possibly reason that God actually "CALLS" people to a status that ensures that they will NOT be in the first resurrection?? To claim that God "CALLS" some people to be nothing more than

financial contributors in this age is just a way of trying to make the people who give us money, while holding back from making a total commitment, feel good. It's a classic illustration of Romans 2:15.

Well, that should suffice as far as examining the various New Testament definitions of "sin" is concerned. But when we talk about godly character, there is one statement in the Old Testament that should also be taken into account. It is in the Book of Hosea.

HOSEA 4:11

Whoredom and wine and new wine take away the heart. (Hosea 4:11)

In the Old Testament the word "heart" is generally used to refer to: the mind, the intellect, the understanding, the character, the convictions, etc.. The word "whoredom" refers to sexual transgressions of any nature, i.e. immorality. The expression "wine and new wine" refers to THE MISUSE of alcohol. So this short verse tells us in plain language:

"Amongst others, there are two things that DESTROY understanding, convictions and character. And those two things are: immorality of any kind and the misuse of mind-altering drugs (alcohol being the specific one that was an issue at that time)."

People who are immoral don't have any real character! They are just selfish! People who are addicted to drugs also don't have any real character!

People who are involved in a sexual relationship outside of marriage, be it premarital or be it extra-marital, cannot please God by diligent tithing or by Sabbath-observance. God is not impressed! It goes without saying that people who are involved in perversions, like homosexuality, etc., obviously also cannot please God. If people who are involved in these things want God's approval, then God's instruction to them is: "FIRST you clean up your life! And THEN you will be accepted!"

As far as mind-altering drugs are concerned: they have been used since antiquity in the rites and rituals of pagan religions. Satan wants people to become addicted to drugs. A drug addict is a slave. Anyone who, by the use of drugs, is willing to relinquish partial or total control over his own mind, even if it is only for limited periods of time, simply cannot develop godly character. The development of godly character is conditional on exercising total control over our own minds for every waking moment of our lives. There are no "off seasons" when we can just "relax" that control a little bit.

So when we think about the development of godly character, then Hosea 4:11 should certainly be a Scripture we spend some time thinking about. It is most applicable to this subject.

Well, that's about all I think I should address at this time. Yes, there are many other areas that can also be linked to this discussion.

Real character goes way beyond our outward actions. Character has to do with what we think and HOW we think. Is it the way God thinks or not? If not, why not? God is aware of our every thought, our every motivation and every intent of our hearts. Actions that are outwardly right and noble do not impress God if they are the expression of devious and questionable motivations.

As with the Apostle Paul, God wants to know whether or not we serve Him with "A PURE CONSCIENCE" (see 2 Timothy 1:3). God wants to know whether we have "PURE MINDS" (see 2 Peter 3:1), and whether we are willing to make the effort to purify our minds.

AND EVERY MAN THAT HATH THIS HOPE IN HIM PURIFIETH HIMSELF, EVEN AS HE
[GOD] IS PURE. (1 John 3:3)

Yes, developing real godly character is not easy. It is not a game we can play. It is hard work. And it requires a lot of effort. But at the end there is a reward from Almighty God. And so ...

AND LET US NOT BE WEARY IN WELL DOING: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.
(Galatians 6:9)

Frank W. Nelte