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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## It Builds Character

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SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ AUGUST 13, 2017

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This morning, we get to hear from one of the great theologians of our world. We will hear from an individual who, despite his youth, examines deep and complex truth; exploring philosophical quandaries, environmentalism, and relationships. You guessed it, I am referring to Calvin—and Hobbes: *Calvin and Hobbes!*

Does anyone else read this? A few days ago, I came across a comic that fits perfectly with our topic for today. The comic depicts Calvin's dad walking out the front door and calling, "It's getting dark, Calvin. Time to come in and go to bed." Calvin responds as any child would, "But Hobbes (his anthropomorphic, stuffed tiger) and I were catching fireflies! Can't we stay out a little longer?"

His dad retorts, "Ha! First you didn't want to go out, and now you don't want to come in!" And then, very smugly, he continues, "See, by not watching TV, you had more fun and now you'll have memories of something real you **did** instead of something fake you **watched**." After being tucked into bed, Calvin confides to Hobbes, "Nothing spoils fun like finding out it builds **character!**"

### What builds character?

What is so appropriate about this comic is not simply that it has the words, "It Builds Character," but rather that it

highlights an age-old discrepancy in our belief about *how* character is formed. Did you notice that Calvin's dad supposes that character is found through experiencing something *real*? In other words, it is through suppressing an inner desire (in this case, watching TV) for an outward experience that Calvin will develop character. On the other hand, Calvin seems to suspect that character is built from looking within as he wrestles with and explores its meaning with his imaginary friend Hobbes, who is really only a manifestation of his internal self. These are two vastly different ways in which character formation has historically been thought to take place. On the one hand, some people think that character is formed from outward experiences suppressing the self, while other people think that it is by looking within that character is enabled.

### **How is character formed?**

Until about the 18th century, nearly everyone believed that character was formed by suppressing the inner self. In fact, stated in today's terms, they believed that humanity was somewhat like a computer and that there were a few glitches in the OS (operating system) of our character. We think that we are just fine and do not notice these glitches for the most part, but put in the right situations our character "bugs" manifest themselves. The OS seems to be fine, but then we get tired or hungry and suddenly we become a bit of a beast. Remember those Snicker's commercials which showed a very grumpy actor who, after taking a bite of the candy bar, became a good character again? We may believe that our character is very strong, but then we enter some sort of competition and before you know it we are saying things and doing things that, thinking back, make us wonder what was going through our head. I recall a mission trip when I was in high school. We were playing basketball when the minister who was with us started "trash

talking” to the other team. Afterward, he felt really convicted by his actions, so much so that he went back and apologized to the other team.

Maybe, just maybe, we think our character is untouchable—until we realize that the bug in our character is pride. We all have bugs in the system and if we are self-reflective enough, we know that we have much deeper flaws within us than the ones previously mentioned.

This is the reality that theologians like Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin referred to as a *sinful* nature. There are bugs within our souls that cause us to have moral, psychological, and social limitations, weaknesses, and failures. What is more, our reason is weak and we are unable to make sense of the complex world which we inhabit.

The prevailing notion of the “buggy operating system” or *sinful* nature led most folks prior to the 18th century to distrust their inner selves when it came to building character. This worldview was implicit in the very fabric of forming our nation. The Founders of our country distrusted their inner selves so much that they built our nation around checks and balances to protect us from any single individual’s overreaching power grab.

With the worldview of distrust of self, individuals saw character development as the suppression of the selfish inner-self through outward accountability. Until quite recently, the word “character” was used to mean “selflessness, generosity, self-sacrifice.” In fact, true character was about suppressing the inner-self to be an instrument of the larger cause. Is that not what the “Six Pillars of Character” are built upon?

- ◆ Trustworthiness
- ◆ Respect

- ◆ Responsibility
- ◆ Fairness
- ◆ Caring
- ◆ Citizenship

In each of these, an individual puts “the cause” ahead of “the self.” If we distrust “the self” due to a bug in the system. We are led to believe that character is built by looking outward.

Then somewhere around the middle of the 18th century, new ideas began to emerge regarding “the self.” Moral romantics like Jean-Jacques Rousseau placed emphasis on our own inner goodness. These sentiments have gradually become more and more a part of our common way of thinking, and today they can be summarized by the term *expressive individualism*. If the inner-self is good, then we ought to trust it to bring about true character. The way to character then, is the expression of the true authentic self. The power of positive thinking, the age of self-esteem, and authenticity are all words and phrases that stem from this basic notion. Trust in “the self” means that character requires looking inward. If that is where character is built, we describe character as being our inward qualities such as grit, resilience, and tenacity which can be mustered from within.

So, which is it? How is character formed? By looking outward? By gaining outward experiences which cause us to think less of “the self”? By looking inward? By discovering the true self and bringing out the authentic version of “the self”? Or is it by looking upward?

### **What is character and how is it built?**

The Bible has a unique take on the topic of character formation. To discover how character is formed we will be

reading from the first chapter of 2 Peter which not only tells us how character is formed, but gives us a list of biblical character traits. Peter, the zealous disciple of Jesus, opens his letter in a typical first century manner by expressing the great hope that we have in the Grace of God made possible through Jesus Christ. After his Christian salutations, Peter explains in no uncertain terms that, because of Jesus, we have everything we need to lead lives of character in 2 Peter 1:3-4.

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup> Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

Within Peter's mindset, we can see several seeds of these ideas. First, we see the seed of distrust of self which Augustine, Luther, and Calvin picked up. We have corruption within ourselves that we need to escape. It is a little like the notion of looking outward for character formation. And yet, the insistence of this passage is that because of the resurrection power of Jesus, we have everything we need, right now, to live lives of Christian character.

The biblical concept of character building is much more complex than just whether character comes from outside or from inside. The complex reality of our nature is this: on one hand, you and I have been created in the image of God; but, on the other hand, we have obscured that image through sin. Our operating system was designed after God's, yet we have some serious bugs.

Created in the image of God, you and I have all the potential

in the world. We are imbued with complexity and wonder, but sin disconnected us from God and broke the OS. Apart from God, we can do nothing. To take the computer illustration just one step further, we are like a super computer with untold power. A computer can perform complex computations, connect to the internet, get directions, make phone calls, and even have face-to-face conversations with people halfway around the world. But what happens when a computer's power is disconnected? All the potential that a computer has simply vanishes when it is disconnected from a power source. You and I are intended to be connected to a power source, and apart from that power source, all the potential we have is lost. God is our power source and we plug in by faith.

Peter tells us that we have tremendous potential. We have all the power of God Who raised Jesus from the dead, at work within us and accessible to us through faith, and we get to participate in the updates to our operating system! Once connected to God, we have a role to play. Peter continues in 2 Peter 1:5-9:

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; <sup>6</sup>and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; <sup>7</sup> and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. <sup>8</sup> For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

The biblical worldview is so much more complex than whether character is formed from outside, from the inside, or from upward by connecting with God. It seems that the

biblical writers assume that on one hand, because of our sinful nature, our character is formed from outside and by our looking upward to God and what happened through Jesus Christ; that we are plugged in with faith as the Holy Spirit lives within us. We have everything we need, right here and right now, to develop a distinctly Christian character in our lives. The focus is outward and upward as God alone has the ability to cultivate character in our lives. It is the Holy Spirit who lives within our lives. We are plugged into our faith. God has given us everything we need right here and right now for a godly life.

The Scriptures speak of character formation as being “*with-ward*.” What does that mean? On one hand, character development lies in the hands of God alone. It is God alone who forms us and Who has the power and the ability to update our buggy operating system. This power is accessible as we plug in by faith, outwardly and upwardly. On the other hand, we have a role to play with God in the development our character. As Peter says in verse 4, we “participate in the divine nature.” Through faith, we participate with God in this process of character building; it is upward, outward, and inward—it is “*with-ward*.”

### **What is the “with-ward” process?**

Peter shares with us the characteristics of a life of Christian character—the process by which we are to live. He says that as we “plug in” to the Heavenly Father, we are to make every effort to add to our faith, *goodness*. Goodness is like moral character. It is virtue. It is the fortitude in our personal moral life to do what is right when we need to. Make every effort to add to our faith, goodness; to our goodness, *knowledge*. This knowledge is not just knowledge of worldly things, but rather this knowledge is the type of knowledge that understands who

God is, and through the lens of understanding who God is, applies that knowledge in such a way that we interface with the world in a compelling way.

Make every effort to add our goodness, knowledge; to our knowledge, *self-control*. And here we see the historic, pre-18th century idea, that “the self” is to be controlled; that we are not to be controlled by “the self.” There is a part of us, a sinful part of us (this “bug” in the operating system) that we need to suppress in order for the righteousness of God would come out in our lives. Self-control—make every effort to add to self-control, *perseverance*. Why? Because the process of trying to suppress that inner self 24-hours a day for our entire lives is absolutely draining. We need to develop the endurance to harness ourselves from within so that we can continue in godliness. Make every effort to add to our perseverance, *godliness*. This word “godliness” is probably the closest word we have in the passage that expresses what it means to have the image of the Divine restored within us.

Remember how we were created in the image of God? When we live a godly life, when the image of God is restored within us, it is like we are plugging into our faith in God and He is updating our operating system in such a way that we once again are restored to who we were created to be. Make every effort to add to your perseverance, godliness; and to your godliness, *mutual affection*. The words “mutual affection” in 2 Peter are translated from the word *philadelphia* which means “the city of brotherly love.” Some transitions actually say, “make every effort to add to your godliness, brotherly kindness or brotherly love that when we live our lives the image of God is restored within us.” We will naturally pour out that affection toward those around us, and by nature, we will form Christian community.



Make every effort to add to your mutual affection, *love*. The whole spectrum starts with faith as we plug into God, and it ends in the culmination of Christian character which is love. That word in 2 Peter is the word *agape* which is epitomized by the love of Jesus Christ who loved us sacrificially, gave himself for us, and enables us by the means of the Holy Spirit to plug into God. Being plugged into the Divine and participating “*with-ward*” in the character building that God is accomplishing, ultimately lead to love. That is the kind of love the Christian character forms within our lives. Peter goes on to tell us there is a great blessing when we allow this type of Christian character to be formed in our lives.

We see in this passage that faith, the power cord to God, builds character. As we stay connected to God through faith and as we apply the power given by Christ, our character OS is updated and the bugs begin to be fixed. Faith plugs us into God’s power, and faith builds to the fulfillment of Christian character, love.

Building distinctly Christian character in our lives can have a really surprising side effect. A few weeks ago I was given a book from someone who knows me well. My family is from northern Illinois and we have been Cubs fans forever and ever. The book is entitled, *Cubs Way: the Zen of Building the Best Team in Baseball and Breaking the Curse* by Tom Verducci. In this spellbinding book, Verducci chronicles several of the key individuals who built the “Lovable Losers” (the Chicago Cubs) from a team that won 71 and lost 91 games in 2011, to the World Series Champs in 2016 who broke the 108-year curse by winning 103 and losing only 58 games. (As they say in Chicago, a lot of teams have a bad century!)

One of the key individuals who helped reboot the team was

the General Manager, Theo Epstein. Prior to signing with the team in Chicago in 2011, Epstein became the youngest general manager in baseball history when he became GM of the Boston Red Sox. Epstein grew up loving baseball and read a book by Bill James called *Baseball Abstract* that revolutionized the way he saw the game. This book led him into the world of *sabermetrics*—the application of statistical analysis of player performance. Epstein applied his mastery of sabermetrics to build a team in Boston which would win the World Series in 2002 and which launched Epstein into the baseball stratosphere. Not only was he the youngest GM in baseball, he also built a dynamic team in a matter of a few years; one that broke an 86-year curse of not winning the World Series.

During his tenure with the Red Sox from 2002 to 2011, the world of baseball changed. In 2002, not many teams were using complicated statistical analysis in their recruiting, which gave him the edge in building the best team. In 2011, nearly every team, with the exception of the Chicago Cubs, had a statistical analysis scouting branch. As a result, competition for key players was tougher. In 2011, Theo Epstein was offered the position of GM for the Chicago Cubs and he knew that statistics were not going to be enough to build the team of the future. Epstein knew that, in order to break this 108-year curse, he was going to have to take an approach that encompassed the need for statistically solid players in addition to a different way to sign them on. The approach he took was surprising.

Soon after joining the Cubs, Epstein told his staff that they needed to define what it meant to be a Cub, and what their process would be for recruiting a winning team. Epstein said, “We are not going to compromise character for talent. We’re the Cubs. We’re going to have both: talent and character!”

Surprised by his own thinking, Theo Epstein once said,

I used to scoff at (the idea of building a team around character), when I first took the job in Boston. I just felt like, you know how we're going to win? By getting guys who get on base more than the other team, and by getting pitchers who miss bats and get ground-balls. Talent wins, but...it's like every year I did the job, I just developed a greater appreciation for how much the human element matters and how much more you can achieve as a team when you have players who care about winning, care about each other, develop those relationships, have those conversations... (character) creates an environment where the sum is greater than the parts.

Certainly, Epstein needed talent. But the Cubs intentionally sought players who would embody character. These soft statistics helped them to create a team whose sum was greater than their individual talents. So it is with us. When we participate with God in forming our Christian character, we discover this blessing. Individuals with character forming a Christian community find that their sum is greater than their parts. This is the reality that Peter communicates at the end of this passage.

If you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive. With our Christian character, we will become individuals who are effective and productive for God's purposes in the world. God is developing us as the players on His team and we need to participate in that development so that we will be effective and productive for God's purposes.

Character development is not just outward and upward, it

is inward as well. It is “with-ward.” May you come to see that it is God who has the ability to build our character. We have a role to play in participating with God in that development. May you plug into the power of God through faith and enter the process of adding to your faith, goodness; to your goodness, knowledge; to your knowledge, self-control; to your self-control, perseverance; to your perseverance, godliness, to your godliness, mutual affection; and to your mutual affection, love. May the character that God develops in you make you effective and productive at accomplishing God’s purposes through your life. Amen.



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