

Sermon Notes

(A basic transcription with modifications for style and clarity)

BUILDING CHARACTER

Clifton Veal, November 19, 2016

Building character! Have you ever said or heard someone say, “He sure is a character!” or “She sure is a character!” What do we mean when we say that? We mean that he or she is funny, or witty, or crazy or different. It means that he or she has some unusual “characteristics”.

Let’s look at a couple of definitions of the word or the term character.

Character:

1. The combination of qualities or features that distinguishes one person, group or thing from another.
2. Moral or ethical strength. (This is close to what we would be talking about when we talk about character.)
3. A description of a person's attributes, traits or abilities. (That makes sense. That’s fair enough.)

Let’s take a look for a moment at an important question. That is: “What is character in the biblical sense? From God’s perspective, what is character?” and “How (and this is important); how do we develop holy, righteous character? Why would we even want to do so? Is that important?”

First of all, what is godly character? Close to the definition that we read above, it is a grouping of God-like characteristics. Now, what does it involve? This is important. It involves first of all, knowing the right from the wrong. And that’s one thing that we spend our lives learning – knowing right from wrong; once again from a godly perspective, from a biblical basis.

It also involves (after we’ve sorted out and we know according to God’s word what is right and what is wrong), needing to choose to do that which is right. Deuteronomy chapter 30. This is a scripture that we’ve all heard many times, but I want to bring that up again right here. Verse 19.

Deuteronomy 30:19 I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, (God says) that both you and your descendants may live;

God has set before us right and wrong. He's allowed us to see what is right and what is wrong and He says, "Do the right thing. Choose life." He wants us to choose life. So we need to know right from wrong. That involves studying God's word, meditating on it. Then we choose to do that which is right. It's our choice. We can choose to do the right thing. Or we can choose to even ignore that little voice that says, "No, you should be doing this because you know it's in the Bible. You know it's right." We can ignore that and say, "No, I want to do the fun thing." Or: "I want to do something that will bring me pleasure that is not right according to God's way." We have that choice. So, second step: we need to choose that which is right.

Third step, this is very important also. Actually do that which is right.

James 1:22 But be doers of the word,

See, good intentions are good. Good intentions are wonderful. But if they simply remain good intentions and we do not follow through with them, then that's all they are: good intentions. And we haven't done the right thing. We knew what it was, we chose (in our minds) to do the right thing, but we didn't actually do it. So, that third step is very important. If we go down just a little further to verse 25:

25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, (continues keeping that law, doing what is right) and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

Of course, obviously, we want to be blessed. We just need to do what we know is right, what God has shown us is the right thing.

Let's look at a sterling example of character in the word of God. If you would open your Bible to Daniel chapter 3. This is the story of the three young men that were in Babylonian captivity. We'll begin in verse 12. We won't read through the entire story. You know this story; it's very familiar to all of us.

Daniel 3:12 There are certain Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego; (those were their Babylonian names) these men, O king, have not paid due regard to you...

Once again, the story is this: an image was set up and everyone was commanded to worship this image. These three young Jewish men, who were followers of God, said: "We can't do that. We won't do that." So these officials of the government went and tattled on them, as we say.

...They do not serve your gods or worship the gold image which you have set up."

13 Then Nebuchadnezzar, in rage and fury, gave the command to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. So they brought these men before the king.

And he said (going on down a little bit), "Is it true, I've set up these idols and you're not worshipping them?" Then he says in verse 15, "I'm going to give you one more chance (summarizing here). When you hear the music play you get down and you worship these gods. That is important. And if you don't we will throw you into the fiery furnace." In other words: "We will kill you. If you do not do what I say you will die."

16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. (That could have been viewed, I guess, as impertinence; but it was godly confidence.)

17 If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king...

And this always fascinates me:

...But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up."

"O King Nebuchadnezzar (they were respectful to him) you do whatever you want to do and say whatever you want to say, but our God's word comes above that of yours. We know what God's word is. We have chosen to do the right thing and we will follow through and if that means that you throw us into the fiery furnace, so be it." Sterling example of character. And of course, end of the story: they were actually thrown into the fiery furnace and God protected them.

I'd like to read just a couple of paragraphs that Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong wrote in the book *Mystery of the Ages*. In my particular version this quote was from pages 69 and 70. Talking about character he said:

"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... way from the false, (know what is right and wrong) 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 do the right."

So we know what's right, we choose to do what's right against temptation and self-desire. How easy is that? Brethren, seriously, you know and I know that is not easy. It is very, very difficult as a matter of fact. Against temptation, against self-desire? "But I don't want to do that. I want to do this. I really want to do something else." Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego could have said, "Well, we really want to live, so we will just touch our knees to the floor very quickly and he'll be happy and..." No, they didn't do that. They knew better.

"...to determine even against temptation or self-desire, to live and do the right. And even then such holy character is the gift of God. It comes by yielding to God to instill HIS LAW (His right way of life in our minds) within the entity who so decides and wills."

Going on, Mr. Armstrong wrote:

"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."

Acquiescence. Acquiescing to God and His way saying: "No, I don't want my way God, I want Your way. That's not easy, but that's what we have to do even after severe trials and tests. Some of you have gone through severe trials and tests. Some of you are going through some very difficult things. But, you realize: "God's way is God's way and it is right. He knows best and I will go God's way."

God can create anything; except sons with character. He has decided that He won't do that. He won't just, by divine fiat, create character. Character has to be developed. It has to be grown. It has to be nurtured. It has to be developed, as I said. Are we going to enable God to make us His children? We should certainly see the need, of course, to develop character. To develop those godly characteristics, to see what is right, to choose to do what is right and to actually do it. Now the question remains: will we grow in character?

1 Samuel 16:7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

God is indeed able to look into our hearts and into our minds and to see what is happening. Kind of a scary thought in a way, but it should be a comforting thought, really. God is able to do that. We may from time to time fool others. We may even fool ourselves. That happens probably more often than we would like to think. But we will never fool God, because He can see our hearts and our minds. He knows what we're thinking. That's why it is important to get in step with God's way.

So, we've talked a little bit about character, what it is, what God expects from us; the three points there.

Let's come down to an everyday, human level. Let's talk about us, what we are and how we react. What does it mean for us personally to grow in character, to have God's character?

First and foremost, we must follow the example of our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ. If we want to build godly character, we have to follow the perfect example that God has given to us, that of our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 5:2 And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.

That is what God did, God and His Son, Jesus Christ. Christ offered Himself. That was the plan that They had, that They developed and Jesus Christ offered Himself

because He wasn't guilty. We were the guilty ones, but He offered to die in our stead. That is the example that He set.

Colossians 2:6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,

So walk in Him, imitate Him, do what He did. Act like He acted. Assume those godly characteristics that He demonstrated.

7 rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught...

So these are things that we don't make up on our own. God teaches us these things. That's why it is important that there be a Church and a ministry so that these things can be taught.

...abounding in it with thanksgiving. (That's another sermon in itself. Are we abounding in these things and are we doing that in thanksgiving?)

Back to what I'm saying here. We need to follow the example of our Elder Brother Jesus Christ and we need to be established in the faith; firmly grounded, feet on the ground, knowing what's right and going forward. That's "being established in the faith."

Obviously, everything that we do should be done following the footsteps of Jesus Christ. This is our foundation. We're talking about being founded, being established on that foundation of Jesus Christ. That's our starting point. But brethren, in all honesty, (of course, we should be always speaking in honesty); but in all honesty, how often do we think of that, what I just said? How often do we think of this? It should come to the point in our lives where we think about it daily, several times during the day.

But what if that's not the case? We just talked about following the example of Jesus Christ and how fundamental and how basic and how very important that is. But what if you don't do that? What if that seldom comes to your mind? Well, maybe we need to then ask ourselves how serious we are about really going God's way. How serious are we? How important is God's law to us? Do we truly see what God is doing with us, do we understand that? And are we striving to attain to the standards which God sets for us? In other words, do we genuinely desire to develop the character of God in our lives?

Someone years and years ago used a phrase in a sermon and I've never forgotten it. They said, "If we were put on trial, and being accused of being a person of character, would there be enough evidence to convict us!!!???" It's a bit of a different way of looking at it, but an interesting way of looking at it.

Now I know that we would probably all say, "Well, yes, I want character, that is my goal." But, once again, I'm not talking about what our "good intentions" are, what our best intentions are. "Oh yes, I want that." I'm not talking about what we "say", in other

words. I am saying that we all need to look at ourselves honestly and critically. These are things I need to think about. I'm not telling you, you need to think about it and I don't. I certainly do. And faced with the honest answers to these questions, there have been times in my life where I'm sure that neither God nor I myself were pleased with the answers. That simply means that we have a lot of work to do.

I think that one thing that we've been learning, certainly one thing that I've been learning; and I've been around for a while. I'm sixty-three years old now and I began listening to the broadcast when I was twelve. So, I've been around for a while and I have been learning in the last couple of years some things which have been very important to me. I've been learning (and I think all of us have), that we do have to look at these issues. We do have to look at ourselves and not just coast along and say, "Oh, well, I've been in the Church forever. I come to Sabbath services every week (or every other week or whatever the situation is). I'm just fine."

We have to ask ourselves, as we do every year before the Passover: "Am I just fine? How fine am I? What is going on in my life? Am I striving to develop character in my life, with God's help, obviously?" We cannot do that without God's help. That is foundational, obviously. But how often do I think about that during the day. Do I think about: "Let's see, I've got a choice to make here. If I want to do the right thing, the biblical principle would be, or the godly principle would be, I need to do this. Am I going to do it? I need to do it because I need to develop character."

Mr. Armstrong said "against severe trials and adversities in our lives." We need to think about these things. We need to ask ourselves these difficult questions; simple questions. Questions that you probably ask yourselves hundreds of times. I have, certainly over the years, certainly around Passover time. How am I doing? But once again, why do we have Passover once a year? Why do we have all of the Holy Days once a year? God knows that we need reminding of things. He knows that we need to be reminded of some of these questions, too.

So we have a realization that godly character needs to be developed. And we want to work on that, certainly. Now, given that as the framework upon which to build, let us look at some practical, every day, human life points and hopefully these will be helpful to you. I know they are to me.

When we're talking about building character, the first thing I would like to mention (this seems like a small thing, but it's really not when you think about it) is:

1. Pay attention and strive to do everything, even the little things right.

Try to do everything right, obviously. Everything that we do is important. How we do the things that we do? What is our attitude as we are doing whatever we are doing? It takes a long time to build character. It takes approximately, to give it an approximate figure, a lifetime. It takes a lifetime to build character. It's a slow process. We have to

build character “one stone at a time”. We put one foot in front of the other and we go forward. That’s the way that it works.

One sad thing about the whole scenario is that it takes a long time to build it: but sometimes, if we’re not careful, if we let ourselves go, we can destroy a whole lot of character in a very short period of time. That’s why we need to keep close to God and ask God to help us and keep up close to Him. And keep His word and His way of life in the forefront of our minds and keep on that journey of building character.

In Matthew chapter 25 we see the parable of the talents. I’m not going to read the entire thing; just highlight a few things here in this story, in this parable.

Matthew 25:14 “For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property.

15 To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. (Now, if we go on down, we know the story. Some did well, some didn’t do very well.)

20 And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’

21 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’

I think every one of us could say we have been entrusted with a little. God has given us a little and He’s allowing us to work with it. What are we doing? Is it developing, is it growing?

29 For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. (In other words, one who has not produced with the little bit that he or she was given.)

30 And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

If we just let it ride and say, “Well, character, yeah, I know that’s important; but that’s for another time. I’m busy I’m working two jobs. I don’t have time to study, I don’t have time to pray, I don’t have time to deal with my family. Character is just going to have to go on the back burner for a while.” That won’t work, brethren. I’m stating the obvious. But if we go this route, it will not work and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But if we develop character with that little bit of knowledge that we’ve been given, if we apply that knowledge. If we say: “I want to choose that which is right” and then we actually do that which is right, we grow in character. Then we can show that we’ve produced something in our lives, once again, with God’s help. God gives everyone of

us a certain amount to work with and expects us to develop that character. So, another point, talking about how we can develop character; these are simple, personal-level things.

2. Do not do everything that is legal.

Now, that may sound just a bit strange. Let's talk about that for a minute. Do not do everything that is legal. Do not assume that simply because a particular action is not condemned in the Bible that it is something that we can do and not suffer negative results, because that is not necessarily at all the case. God's word is not a listing of right and wrong actions. So, if we find it listed somewhere on the good side we can do it. If it's listed somewhere on the negative side, we shouldn't do it. I mean, there are a lot of things talked about in God's word, but it's not just simply a listing. God gives us principles. God gives us principles of life – and He helps us, then, to live by those principles.

1 Corinthians 10:23 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.

In other words, there are some things that we could do because it's not blatantly a sin, but maybe we would be hurting someone. Maybe we would not be edifying someone. The question is, *do* we consider the consequences of our actions? Because sometimes it takes character to think of others first, over and above ourselves. That takes character.

The Bible, for example, certainly does not forbid us to speak. It doesn't forbid us to talk. But sometimes we say the wrong things, don't we? And when we do that, we cause problems. We can cause problems for ourselves; we can cause problems for others.

I can openly criticize someone for something that they have done wrong and is very clearly wrong. I can openly criticize them. But, in doing so, I might be sowing the seeds of discord; discord between myself and that person. I might be ruining that person's reputation. And in a week or two or maybe last month he changed, he repented or she changed and repented and that's no longer an issue for God. But we're bringing it up and ruining the person's reputation. That's not something we want to do.

Christ, the one with supreme character, certainly considered *us* over Himself. It would have been legal, lawful, allowed for Christ not to sacrifice Himself for us. But He chose to do so.

Here's another example in Romans. I won't read through that whole example. I'll mention it for you. Romans chapter 14:14-21; talking about your brother being grieved by what you eat. In verse 20 it says:

Romans 14:20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.

In other words, in this particular case, you're allowed to eat a particular something. But if you do that you will offend your brother. "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God." All things are lawful, but they're not all expedient; they're not all edifying, they're not all good.

Sometimes when we go ahead and do something that is lawful but questionable, possibly because of the consequences, it may be because we are looking more at the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law. Because the spirit of the law says don't hurt your brother even if you could do that. But if it's going to hurt him you probably shouldn't do that.

Some people enjoy "living on the edge", right up on the edge. They go as close to the edge of what is the difference between right and wrong, whatever that is; as close as they possibly can. Not a good practice at all. That serves, though, to illustrate the fact that the negative can sometimes be very, very attractive. You're on the edge because you're being attracted to that edge. And attracted by whom? Attracted not by godly forces, not by God's Holy Spirit. And what does that leave us? Satanic forces, Satan himself. So we have to be very, very careful. We don't want to be pulled over into the dark side!

Here's another point that we might want to keep in mind. And this will help us, hopefully, to grow in character. This is very, very simple. I know you've heard it before, but I want to mention it.

3. When in doubt, don't.

If you're in doubt about doing something, you probably just shouldn't do it. You shouldn't do it because there's a reason for your doubt. And you may or may not know what the reason for your doubt is. But it's probably a good idea to give it a miss that time. Think about it later and figure it out a bit more carefully.

Romans 14:22 Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

In other words, once we have learned what God wants us to do and we do something despite that, you're going to condemn yourself. We don't want that. That's not something we should be doing.

23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

When in doubt, don't! If you can do it in full faith that it is a good thing to do, a right thing to do, within God's law both spiritually and in the letter of the law; it's perfectly all right. "I'm not going to hurt anyone." If you can do that, fine.

But if you can't do that, then you shouldn't. Because then you cannot have faith that you're doing the right thing.

How many times do we (and the longer we're in God's Church the more this will happen) have this "little voice" (and I don't mean actually a little voice, but you know what I mean) telling us that something is not right. "Oh, I just had this feeling that it wasn't right." Generally speaking, it is a good idea to follow that little voice. If that little voice is based on God's law and God's way of life, then it's a good idea just to back off and be careful.

Because, you know, if we think about it carefully, why would we want to settle for something that is doubtful? Why would we want to do that? Why should we not want to wait and have something that is sure and good? That's the better way. Here's another point, that, if we keep this in mind from time to time and live our lives like this, then it will help us to develop character. The point is this:

4. Live as though God were in the room with us at all times.

We should ask ourselves a very basic question. Am I more concerned with what people *might* see me doing -- or am I concerned with what God definitely *is* seeing me do? Because, once again as I said earlier, we can fool ourselves. "Nobody saw me; it's okay." Well, God did. God knows what we're doing.

Ecclesiastes 12:13 (ESV) The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

Fear God and keep His commandments. Live as if God were right there at all times helping us. Not a "God's going to get you for that" sort of an attitude. (I think that goes back to an old Dolly Parton song, "God's Gonna Gitcha for That".) But that's not what God is about. God is going to help us do the right thing. But we have to want to do the right thing.

You may remember a mock newspaper that was published by the Church many, many years ago. I thought it was a beautiful piece. There were several headlines. The Millennium has begun, agriculture has turned around and all these wonderful things were happening. Several headlines reflecting this time in the Millennium when all people would be following God's way.

There was one story of a personal nature that you may remember. There were two teen-aged young people -- a boy and a girl -- on a beach. They found themselves, shall we say, in a compromising situation and were just about to get themselves in trouble with the laws of God. Do we not sometimes think, "We can do whatever we want as long as no one sees us? As long as nobody sees me doing something wrong I'm okay." In this particular story they were kind of thinking along those lines. We don't have to worry about it. No, that's wrong! We do have to worry about it. God always sees us. In the newspaper article, a son or daughter of God intervened to remind them what the right way was.

A son or daughter of God, a spirit being; that could be one of us in the Millennium, hopefully. It would be one of us, because we've learned that. We've learned now what is right and what is wrong. We've learned, maybe not in that specific instance, not in that specific situation. But we know, "Uh-oh, this could lead to some really bad things, what those two young people are doing. Let me help them, let me warn them." They were encouraged to walk in the right way of God.

We must be very careful to "guard the doors of our minds". Years ago, in one of the Church's publications (in the English language) there was an article which talked about some of the principles in the computer world. The main theme of the article was "Garbage in – garbage out!" If you program or input something in to a computer which is incorrect (in other words "garbage in"), then you can only expect a wrong answer ("garbage out"). That is why we must be careful about what we allow into our minds. If we allow a great deal of "garbage", a great deal of rubbish into our brains, then we will probably only be able to output something which is less than a godly standard. So, let's be very careful.

I heard a definition of character in a sermon once. And once again, this is a definition that I have never forgotten. It is very, very appropriate, I think, to this subject. The minister said, "Character is what you do when no one else is around." Nobody can see you. I can get away with this because nobody is here, nobody is looking. No, God is there. Character is what you do when no one else is around.

So we really need to live as if God were present at all times, because He is!! Here's another principle.

5. Do not simply "follow the crowd".

Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...

This takes a great deal of effort on our part, a great deal of effort. The majority of people simply do what everyone else does. The majority just follows the crowd. You've probably heard it said: "A dead fish can sort of float downstream with everything. It takes a live fish to swim against the current." And it does. In our spiritual lives we have to put forth effort and swim against the currents of this world.

Exodus 23:2 You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice,

In other words, going along with the crowd, doing what everyone else is doing, that can get you into a great deal of trouble. Do not follow the crowd to do evil. In the early Church, frankly, those who simply followed the majority of what people were doing, eventually would have ended up being good Protestants or Catholics. Just follow the crowd, because that's what the crowd did. It was not easy to be in God's Church. And

eventually, what I'm saying, had one followed the crowd, one would not have been in God's Church.

Revelation 2:20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

And what do we see all around us? Not a whole lot of food sacrificed to idols, but sexual immorality. And the world is saying, "It's great!" The world is saying, "Just do it. If it feels good, do it." That what the world tells us. So, do we just do it because everybody is doing it? Well, some people do and that is not a good thing at all.

21 I gave her time to repent...

22 Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation,

Is that what we want? No, it is not. That is absolutely not what we want. We cannot follow the crowd and do what everyone else does.

Let's go on to another point.

6. Tackle tough assignments first.

Now, why do I say that? Well, it's just a good principle in life. Tackle tough assignments first. It is often a good idea to do the difficult parts of any task at the beginning of your work. Now, I say this because if you get into the habit of putting the hard things off until later, what happens? You will eventually find yourself not doing them. At least that's my experience in life and from the people that I've talked to, the experience of many people.

I am thinking, when I say tackle the tough assignments first, I'm thinking particularly about prayer and Bible Study when I give this principle. I'm not saying it's hard to pray and hard to study, but sometimes it is. Let's be honest. Sometimes it is. We've got other things to do. We've got to get to work and, oh, I know I should have gotten up a half an hour earlier so I could have done some Bible Study or done some prayer that was necessary. But, oh, I just overslept, whatever. Then you're running throughout the day and oh, I don't have time anymore to do that. And does it get done later? Sometimes it will, but in the majority of cases probably it will not.

So, prayer and Bible Study and there again, I'm not telling you, oh you need to pray and study in the morning before you go to work. It is a good way to do it. Some people can pray and study on their lunch hour. Or they do that after they get home and that's fine. Whatever works for you. I've always worked on the principle in my life personally that if there's no gasoline, if there's no petrol in the tank, my car is not going very far. So, I can't wait until evening to fill up the tank. But, what I'm saying is, the important

thing is that you don't put it off, because if you put it off you probably won't do it. Pray and study early on if you can. Make that a priority, certainly.

You know, it's a lot harder to pray and study than it is to watch television. Have you ever noticed that? It's easy to just sit down on the couch or the easy chair and veg and turn the television on. Sometimes we need to do the harder things first. That's what I'm saying. Here's another principle:

7. Start today. Don't wait.

Hebrews 3:6 but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice,

8 do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness,

Don't harden your hearts and say, "No, no, no, no, no. I don't want that, I can't take that, I don't want to do that." Have a soft heart. Do what is necessary today, today.

12 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.

13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

14 For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

15 As it is said, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

Exhort one another every day as long as it is called today. Today is the chance we have in our lives. Tomorrow is not here yet. Yesterday is gone. We did a good job. We didn't do a good job. It's gone! Today is what we have on our plate before us. What are we doing with today? So we need to make sure we are doing something right now and doing it positively. And we need to start today. Another point:

8. Always strive for excellence – especially, of course, in the spiritual realm. (That's primarily what we're concerned with.)

Philippians 1:9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,

10 so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,

"So that you may approve what is excellent." Do we know what is excellent? Are we striving for what is excellent? It seems as there's no concept of striving for

excellency in today's world; or very, very little. It will be harder to do that. It will take more time. It will probably be more tedious. But there is no substitute for excellence. And once again, I'm speaking primarily in the spiritual realm. That means there's no substitute for studying God's word. There's no substitute for praying. There's no substitute for meditating. If you say, "I'm just not going to do that", then you're not drinking in of God's word, you're not thinking about God's word. You're not asking God to help you to understand more about His way of life.

If you were to go back and read about the materials that God wanted to use for the construction of the Tabernacle, you will see very clearly that God loves quality materials. And more importantly, God loves to see quality in our lives. He wants to see us be men and women of quality. That's what we need to strive to be, men and women of excellence.

Let's go on to another point now. We're talking about how we can, bit by bit, here and there, on a personal day to day level; how we can grow in character.

9. Respond properly to correction – take it to heart.

Respond properly to correction. We don't want to be corrected, do we? We want people to say, "Oh, there, there. You're such a wonderful person and you've done such a wonderful job and everybody loves you and all is good and right." That's what we want to hear; but that's not always the case. Sometimes we do things that are wrong. And sometimes we need to be corrected for that. God is very good at correcting us. And God can use a wide variety of people, places and things to correct us. Are we open to that and do we take it to heart? A very basic principle:

Hebrews 12:6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."

So, if we're never being chastised that either means that God doesn't love us or it means we're not looking for that. We're not ready to be corrected. We're not showing God that we want to change, because He will help us.

To be spiritual sons and daughters, we have to be able to accept correction. We must realize that we are not perfect. But also that God really, really wants to help us to learn. And one of the ways that He helps us to learn is by correcting us.

I'm not a pilot. I always wanted to be a pilot, but I never became a pilot. But, in the world of pilots, if you're piloting an airplane and you're off course you desperately want correction. You want to be corrected and brought back onto the right course. We need to be that way, too. Correction is not a bad thing. Correction helps us to get back onto the right course.

10. Persevere in doing right.

Proverbs 24:10 If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.

Brethren, there will be adversity. Things will, from time to time, get difficult and we may be at a time now in the history of mankind when things will begin getting very difficult in the end time. How do we react to that? If you remove any chance there is to fail, you remove the chance to build character. So we will fail in adversity and we need to persevere in doing the right thing. We've studied, we know what is right. Once again, we need to choose that which is right and then we need to actually do it.

Hebrews 12:3 Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

In other words, look to our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ. See what He went through. Take from His example. Learn from that.

4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (Jesus Christ did.)

5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? (Jesus Christ, I mean, shed His blood for us. Not that He sinned. He did not.) **"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him.**

So, if we have done something wrong, if we have gotten off course and are corrected and we are open to seeing that correction, go back and do what is right. Learn from that. Learn a lesson from that and choose, once again, to do what is right and to do it. Persevere in doing right. Point number 11:

11. Be consistent in doing what is right.

Don't be one way at home and another way at services. I've heard stories over the years so many times. Oh well, so and so at services, he or she, they're all well dressed and smiling and there's this beautiful picture. But, boy, when they're at home, I've been around their home. I've been around their family and it's a totally different story. Brethren, we cannot be that way. We need to be consistent in doing what is right and consistently going the right way. Not just going the right way when we're at services. That's easy to do. Everybody there is trying to do that. And then when we get home we stop? That's not the way that we should be at all.

James 1:6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord;

8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

That's why it is important to be consistent. Not double-minded, not, oh I've got this secret life over here. I act this way when I'm in that environment and then when I'm at Church services I act this way. And when I'm there I act another way. I'm double-

minded. No, do not be that way, God says, because such a person is unstable in all his ways.

1 Kings 18:21 And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt you between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.

In other words, choose. You know what's right. Choose. It's been laid before you. "I set before you life and death. Choose life.", God says. But don't halt between two opinions. Isaiah chapter 29 verse 13. We're talking about being consistent in our following of God's way.

Isaiah 29:13 Wherefore the Lord said, forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:

It can't be that way. It shouldn't be that way. If we find ourselves being this way, we need to change. We need to go on our knees before God, we need to repent and we need to ask God to help us to change because, as I was saying earlier, sometimes we have the best of intentions. We say/think, "Oh, I really want to do that." But what do we do? God was saying here that's the way Israel was. They said they wanted to follow Me, but they didn't do it. They didn't follow through. They weren't consistent.

One last point:

12. Look past the present.

And, brethren, that can sound sort of idealistic, philosophical and airy-fairy. And what good does that do us. Well, the hope that we have has to be a concrete hope. It has to be something important in our lives. We have to want that. We have to want to go God's way.

Romans 8:18 (ESV) For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (at a future time).

That's the way Paul looked at it. Can we look at it that way? Can we follow His example in that regard? Satan will be trying everything to get us to give up, to get us to get our eyes off of God's Kingdom. We have to be able to look past the present. Look into the future and see what God has promised us. Look at God's promises, look at the hope that He gives us.

And, with all of these things that we've talked about today, brethren, we have to realize that we cannot compromise. We cannot, we should not, compromise. We need to ask God to help us to set our minds against compromise, against compromising with godly values, compromising with God's truth.

So what does this process of building holy, righteous character mean for us? In short, it simply means becoming more Christ-like, becoming more God-like; taking on the characteristics of our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ and of God our Father. That's what it means as we strive to copy the character of Jesus Christ. He counts us as His brothers and sisters. That's what we need to be striving for.

So, our goal, brethren, is to become more and more God-like. If we are to become part of His family, well, we need to act like it. We need to act like members of His family. We need to conduct ourselves in a way which demonstrates that we do desire that goal. Once again, if we were on trial for being men and women of character, would there be enough evidence to convict us? In order to act like Jesus Christ, we need to learn to think like Jesus Christ. We need the type of character that Jesus Christ had.

As He suffered in order to help us, so we go through things that are not easy; persecutions, afflictions of every stripe. And sometimes we have to suffer. We suffer trials, trials of health (there's been a lot of that); all kinds of trials. But you know, they try our character. And these trials, hard though they be, difficult though they be, will help us to grow spiritually. And as we grow spiritually now, of course, we will be better able to help others both now and in the World Tomorrow. ♦