

# Character Counts! Really Counts!

Africa Nazarene University, Nairobi, Kenya

E. LeBron Fairbanks

**If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself** (Moody, 2015).

Character is different from reputation. Reputation is what you are supposed to be; character is what you are.

Character is what you are when nobody is around. Character is who you are in the pressure times of our lives.

Character springs from the core values by which we build our lives. Character provides the moral compass by which we live our lives. Character captures what we most want to model and mentor with whom we live and for whom we lead. Character is always the wellspring and foundation of our outward actions.

Character counts! Really counts!

In this commencement address to the Africa Nazarene University graduates, I challenge each of you to make a covenant with God – a covenant to be passionate about your Christian character formation and the character development in those with whom you live and work.

In his second epistle (2 Peter 1: 3-12), Peter asks the character question, *“What sort of people ought we to be?”* He is quick to give his answer: *“Men and women of good and godly character.”* Peter knew that God is more interested in our character than He is in our comfort, accomplishments and reputation.

Character counts. Really counts!

Peter makes three assertions regarding Christian character.

1. Character qualities must be intensely pursued.

2. Character formation is a life-changing process.

3. Character development has a profound purpose.

### **I. Character qualities must be intensely pursued.**

Often, I ponder this question: Do people around us see in us the character qualities identified by Peter? I'm afraid they may see or hear just the opposite, like a cynical tongue, a negative attitude, a judgmental spirit, or a condescending demeanor.

If we do not guard our thoughts and spirit, these negative attitudes will result in destructive behaviors. Perhaps we, on our jobs, in our homes or churches, or even on our campus, have not escaped the temptation to cynicism, negativism, and condescension. God forgive us!

The Bible identifies very different character qualities to be intensely pursued if we are to become men and women of good and godly character.

Peter mentions in chapter 1: 5-7 the qualities of goodness, knowledge (or discernment), self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love.

Paul's list in Ephesians 4:2 includes humility, gentleness, patience, and kindness. The Old Testament prophet Micah asked, *"And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"* (Micah 6:8)

A friend said to me several years ago, "Life is too short not to live together kindly, compassionately and forgivingly." I was immediately reminded of Ephesians 4:32, *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as in Christ God forgave you."*

As Christians, we want these character qualities to characterize us at our best and convict us at our worst. From God's perspective, Christian character qualities are absolutely essential and must be intensely pursued.

### **II. Peter doesn't just identify essential character qualities; he insists that character formation is a life-changing process.**

In other words, the character qualities identified by Peter flow from a life that has been saved by God's grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ, who calls us to a life of holy

living. Yet these very qualities of the holy life must be nurtured, cultivated, and developed throughout our lives if we truly are to be Christlike.

Christian character formation takes place over a lifetime and is shaped both through our response to scriptural imperatives and through a process of brokenness, prayer, silence, and confession.

I have discovered a painful yet fascinating relationship between brokenness and character development. I must continually ask the question in the conflict situations of life: what is God wanting to teach me through this situation, this circumstance, or through this encounter...where I work, where I live, or even where I study?

The issue isn't who is right or wrong. The issue is my response to and attitude toward the person, situation, circumstance, or encounter--not why and what if; but, what can I learn, and how can I change.

James 1:2-4 challenges us to *"consider it pure joy...whenever we face trials of many kinds because we know that the testing of our faith develops perseverance."* Perseverance, James states must *"finish its work so that we may be mature and complete, lacking nothing."*

In Psalm 66:10-12, David prays, *"For you, O God, have tested us. You refined us, as silver is refined. You laid affliction upon our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads. We went through fire and water, but you brought us out to rich fulfillment."* God's process of helping us develop character involves being broken by Him. According to Psalm 51, *"broken and contrite spirits are sacrifices we bring to God."*

We can respond to the brokenness in our lives in one of several ways: We can resent the situation, person, circumstance, or God...and thus grow bitter, become angry, and withdraw. But a transforming response to brokenness drives us to our knees. In these moments, we ask God in prayer what He wants to teach us through this "dark night of the soul."

What really hurts is that God often uses people who are different from us – teachers, employers, family, or students - often people with whom we may have problems, to teach us these lessons *we* need to know about ourselves. As strong as we think we are, we recognize how weak we really are, and how much we need our heavenly Father if we are to grow in holiness of life. And, again, we are driven to our knees.

Christian character formation begins with brokenness, which leads to prayer, and then we listen in silence. Psalm 39:1 states, *"I will keep a muzzle on my mouth...I will...not let my tongue lead me into sin."* In commenting on this verse, Henri Nouwen (1991) makes a profound statement, "When the door of the steam bath is continually left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it."

How often we open our mouths and speak or write in social media posts about events of the world, or about people, or circumstances; and how seldom we close our mouths and listen to God. It is when we are on our knees, during the times of brokenness, honesty, and confession, that our dependence on Him is strongest.

And in these moments, we cry out in confession how really weak we are in our own strength. Remember the chorus: *"His strength is perfect when our strength is gone, He'll carry us when we can't carry on; Raised in His power, the weak become strong; His strength is perfect, His strength is perfect"* (Chapman, date unknown).

**Remember, Christian character formation is a life-changing and lifelong process, nurtured primarily by the spiritual disciplines of confession, silence, prayer, the trials and testing of our faith and made effective in our lives by His grace and His strength alone!**

Character counts. Really Counts!

**III. Finally, Peter drives home the point that character development has a profound purpose.**

In the book, *Becoming a Person of Influence*, the authors (Maxwell & Dorman, 1997) state, "many succeed momentarily by what they know, some succeed temporarily by what they do, but few succeed permanently by who they are." Leading decisively and faithfully is really about who we are, not what we do.

Being a man or woman of good and godly character produces profound results. If we have the character qualities identified in 2 Peter 1:5-8 increasingly in our lives, we will be both effective in reflecting Christlikeness in our lives and productive in the ministry of reconciliation with others.

God wants to develop these Christian character qualities in the lives of the mentor and the person being mentored, so that we can participate with Him in His great mission in

the world. Amazingly, we participate with God in His mission of reconciliation through living godly lives before others, and faithful lives before Him. What a humbling thought!

Five questions have helped me in my ministry of reconciliation and my pursuit of Christlikeness. Perhaps they will help you and those with whom you live and lead.

**Will this action I am considering strengthen me spiritually?**

**Would I want my son, my wife, or my best friend to copy this action of mine?**

**Does this action violate a biblical principle?**

**Does this action strengthen the body of Christ?**

**Would an unbelieving friend be attracted to Christ and the Christian faith by my behavior?**

Character Counts. Really counts!

God is more interested in our character than He is in our accomplishments, our comfort...or our reputation. He wants to shape you and me for Kingdom priorities. He desires for us to participate with Him in reconciling the world unto Himself!

I ask you to consider this question as I conclude: when you come to the end of your life, how do you want to be remembered – for your character or for your reputation? *Peter* comes down squarely on the side of character.

He admonishes disciples in the mentoring relationship, men and women of good and godly character, to model lives characterized by goodness, discernment, self-control, perseverance, godliness, kindness, and love so that both the mentor and mentee will be effective and productive in the things that count for eternity.

Remember, character counts. Really counts!

E. LeBron Fairbanks

[lfairbanks@boardserve.org](mailto:lfairbanks@boardserve.org)

[www.boardserve.org](http://www.boardserve.org)

