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## STUDY GUIDE I – “CHARACTER”

### WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT

Everyone wants "a good reputation." After all, it's our reputation that goes before us and opens many of the important doors in life. And yet the words of Abraham Lincoln remind us that **reputation** is only the reflection of an even greater quality; that of **character**. Lincoln wisely observed that "Character is like a tree and reputation is its shadow. The shadow is what we think it is and the tree is the real thing."

So how do we grow and develop a strong character... 'the real thing'. This study has been purposely developed to assist any individual or small group of like-minded individuals, in grappling with the difficult questions surrounding the development of a stronger character.

### OVERVIEW

What makes up a person's character? There are many ways to look at this question, but all roads ultimately lead to the same destination: simply put, a person's character consists of those qualities that determine his or her response to the circumstances and challenges of life.

Character is what motivates us to respond in the way that we do when confronted with the realities of life that require us to make choices or decisions.

But character is NOT what we do... it's who we are. It's not the choices or decisions themselves; rather it's the moral fiber of our being from whence those choices and decisions flow.

### Consider the following:

1. A man determines to exercise every morning before work, and then proceeds to follow through on his decision. It's the discipline of following through that reflects his character...
2. A team leader understands that the team's success depends on every member's contribution, and so she directs all accolades and recognition toward the entire team rather

than soaking up the spotlight. It's the humbleness of putting others first that reflects her character...

3. A high-school student musters the strength to say "no" in refusing to go along with others in performing a hurtful prank when he knows that it will cost him dearly in popularity and approval ratings. It's the courage of standing on principle that reflects his character...

4. An employee decides not to seek reimbursement for illegitimate expenses on her expense report even though no one will know the difference. It's being truthful at all times that reflect her character.

These four character qualities: Discipline, Humbleness, Courage, and Honesty are critical traits to which we will direct our attention in this study.

The Greek word for character is "charaktér," which is the word originally used to describe an engraving tool or the impression left by an engraving tool. In Scripture, the word for character means "express image." Christ is referred to in Hebrews 1:3 as the "express image" of God. And we find in Romans 8:28-29 that one of Christ's primary goals is for us as Christians to be conformed to His image.

*Before you begin this study, please spend a minute quietly asking God to use this material and His Word to help you develop stronger character by conforming more into the image of His Son.*





4. Verse 25 says we live by God's Spirit. In what sense does living by the Spirit depend on our cooperation through self-discipline?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What is attractive about the character trait of discipline?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. As you compare the list in verses 19-21 with that in verses 22-23, where do you find the greatest need for discipline in your own life?

### ***APPLICATION***

- Consider one area of your life that can benefit from greater discipline. What would it mean for you to trust God by allowing His Holy Spirit to work in that area?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Pray that God will help you be a person of discipline in that area, and share your commitment to pursue that goal with a trusted friend... someone who will encourage you along the way in this regard.

CHARACTER – STUDY #2 – Humility

## Humility

What is humility?

Humility is one of those words that's hard to define... like love, or beauty. It's actually easier to see it than it is to define it. And while humility isn't necessarily an action word, it is clearly revealed in our actions. Perhaps C.S. Lewis summed it up best when he observed, "humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less."

We're prone to place ourselves ahead of others because we care more about ourselves than we do others. Why – because over time we develop an unhealthy sense of our own self-worth:

- I should get the next opportunity because I've been waiting longer.
- Whose need could possibly be a more important than mine?
- I should be first simply because I deserve it!

Humility is a state of mind. It's an awareness of where we really fit in the big picture of life. It's a realization that I am not the center of life... the world does not revolve around **me, my, mine**. It is coming to terms with who we are in the light of who God is, and then "living out" that reality in our day-do-day lives.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- In which of the following areas have you found difficult to display humility?

\_\_\_ Playing sports or games

\_\_\_ Relationship with a family member

\_\_\_ When someone butts in line ahead of you

\_\_\_ Your favorite hobby or pastime

\_\_\_ Driving in heavy traffic

\_\_\_ When being given an honor/award

\_\_\_ Interactions with "know-it-all" people

\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

- Why was it difficult to practice humility in those instances listed above that you checked?

- How much was your lack of humility in those instances driven by others' actions and how much was determined by your sense of self-worth?

## **SCRIPTURE LESSON**

### **Read Luke 18: 9-14**

<sup>9</sup>To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

<sup>13</sup>“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast<sup>s</sup> and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

<sup>14</sup>“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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1. To what kind of person does Luke 18:9 tell us Jesus was speaking the parable?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Who was more honest with God about where he fit in the big picture of life (the Pharisee or the tax collector)? Why was that individual able to see himself more accurately and clearly in God’s estimation than the other individual?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What basis or benchmark did the Pharisee use for comparing himself to the tax collector?

4. What basis or benchmark did the Pharisee use for comparing himself to others?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What does Christ mean when He says, “those exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted?”
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Do you have any capabilities and talents you can honestly say were developed by you from scratch without help or assistance from anyone? (Think hard before you answer... and read First Corinthians 4:7 to assist with developing your answer.)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. Who is a good role model of humility in today’s culture? What do you find attractive about the character trait of humility that you see modeled by him or her?

### ***APPLICATION***

- Consider an aspect of life where you’re prone to compare yourself favorably to others or consider yourself superior in any way? How does that detract from your ability to relate to and connect with others in a positive way?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Pray that God will help you to see yourself as He sees you, and that you will develop a greater awareness and a greater appreciation for all that you have received from Him.

## **COURAGE**

What comes to mind when you think of someone who is courageous? The word **courage** is often associated with soldiers, fire fighters, and explorers of the unknown... those whom we imagine to be fearless. But courage is not the absence of fear. In fact, it is often taking action in the face of fear. As the old Hollywood cowboy John Wayne once put it: "Courage is being scared to death... and saddling up anyway." Courage is having the determination to do the right thing, even when others don't. It's a willingness to stand for what you believe, even when others won't. It's having the state of mind or spirit to align your thinking and your behavior with your beliefs and convictions, especially in the face of difficulty, pain, or danger.

It takes courage to fight the temptations and struggles in everyday life. It takes courage to stand alone. But how does one become courageous? Sometimes we think courageous people were just born that way... fearless. However, courageous people are no different than anyone else. They're just ordinary people who chose at some point to face their fears rather than run from them.

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

- Who is someone you have admired because of their courage? Why?
  
- Think of a time when you found it difficult to display courage? What fear, difficulty, pain or danger were you facing? How did you handle it?

### **SCRIPTURE LESSON**

Background: In 445 BC, Nehemiah was a devout Jew serving in the highly trusted position as royal cupbearer to Persian King Artaxerxes in the Persian capital of Susa. Upon hearing about his fellow Jews' plight, Nehemiah becomes burdened in his spirit to help his countrymen rebuild and restore the city of Jerusalem and God's temple. God's moves on the heart of King Artaxerxes to appoint Nehemiah for the task of rebuilding Jerusalem, and while engaged in this difficult work, Nehemiah is challenged by a group of non-Jewish leaders (Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, and others) whose authority and financial well-being will be undermined by any successful restoration of Jerusalem.

## Read Nehemiah 6:1-17

Chapter 2 <sup>1</sup>In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, <sup>2</sup>so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.” I was very much afraid, <sup>3</sup>but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” <sup>4</sup>The king said to me, “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven, <sup>5</sup>and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.” <sup>8</sup>And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.

Chapter 6 <sup>1</sup>When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it—though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates—<sup>2</sup>Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: “Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono.”

But they were scheming to harm me; <sup>3</sup>so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?” <sup>4</sup>Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.

<sup>5</sup>Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter <sup>6</sup>in which was written: “It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king <sup>7</sup>and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together.”

<sup>8</sup>I sent him this reply: “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.” <sup>9</sup>They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”

<sup>10</sup>One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, “Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you.” <sup>11</sup>But I said, “Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!” <sup>12</sup>I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. <sup>13</sup>He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

<sup>14</sup>Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me. <sup>15</sup>So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup>When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

1. Courage is required to stand for what is important. How do we know that the task of rebuilding the Temple and Jerusalem was very important to Nehemiah?
2. Was Nehemiah taking a risk in allowing his sad countenance to be seen by the King? Why?
3. What important thing did Nehemiah do in Chapter 2, Verse 4 to help him have courage before answering King Artaxerxes?
4. What tactics did Nehemiah's enemies use when attempting to get him to stop rebuilding the walls? What happens when we allow ourselves to be intimidated?
5. How much of his energy did Nehemiah spend on the threats from his opposition and how much did he pour into the task of rebuilding? Why is this kind of focus so important to sustaining courage in the face of adversity?
6. What activity provided Nehemiah with a key source of strength, helping him to persist in the face of difficulty and adversity (Chapter 6, Verse 9)?

7. What was the greatest fear Nehemiah faced, and how much was he willing to sacrifice in pursuing what he believed to be the right course of action (Chapter 2, Verse 8 and Chapter 6, Verse 10)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. To whom does Nehemiah attribute the successfully rebuilt wall that resulted from his courageous stand (Chapter 6, Verse 16)? How critical was Nehemiah's reliance and dependence upon God to the level of courage he mustered?

### ***APPLICATION***

- Think about a challenge or opportunity you currently face (or may face in the near future) that will require courage on your part in order to be strong and stand for what is right and just. What decisions are important for you to make now in order to prepare yourself?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Consider the consequences you may experience as a result of doing what is right and just. Are you willing to pay the price?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Pray that God would help you to have the courage needed to stand for what is right and just.

## CHARACTER – STUDY #4 – Honesty

### **HONESTY**

Very few of us would consider ourselves to be dishonest. We don't consider ourselves liars, cheats, or thieves. And yet any attempt at honesty compels us to acknowledge that we have all spoken untruths or engaged in deceit at some time in our past. How well did our lies and deceit serve us? Again, any honest assessment will reveal, "not very well in the end."

Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "Honesty is the first chapter in the book of Wisdom." Everyone wants to be counted as trustworthy. And trust is bred by honesty. Honesty means acting in a trustworthy way so that you will respect yourself and be respected by others.

So how does one build honesty into their character? Simply put, being honest is about actions, words, and deeds that are always consistent with the truth.

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

- What are some of the reasons that people lie, cheat, or steal?
- What are some of the drawbacks when others discover that we've not been honest with them?

### **SCRIPTURE LESSON**

Background: During the very early history of the Church, many wealthy Christians sold property to help those who were in need, the result being that early-day Christians held many possessions in common.

#### **Read Acts 4:32 through 5:11 AND Luke 16:10**

Chapter 2 <sup>32</sup> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

Chapter 5 <sup>1</sup> Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup> With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

<sup>3</sup> Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? <sup>4</sup> Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." <sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. <sup>6</sup> Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. <sup>7</sup> About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price." <sup>9</sup> Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." <sup>10</sup> At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Luke 16:10 <sup>10</sup> Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.

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1. While the consequences of lying are seldom as costly as they were for Ananias and Sapphira, it still begs the question: Is there ever a time when there are no consequences for being dishonest?
2. It's doubtful that Ananias and Sapphira sat down and devised an elaborate scheme to mislead, and in doing so cause harm to the Church. What was their motive in lying to the Church (what were they trying to accomplish)?
3. When we tell a lie, from whence does it spring (Chapter 5, Verse 3)? Does this imply a deliberate choice on our part when we lie, cheat, or steal (Chapter 5, Verse 2)?

4. When we choose to be dishonest, at least three stakeholders are always hurt. Who are they?
  
5. While we can fool some of the people some of the time when we're dishonest, do we ever fool God with our dishonesty? What does dishonesty do to our relationship with God?
  
6. Is it ever okay to tell little white lies?
  
7. Why is it harder to be honest when significant matters arise if we've not been honest about the small things of life?
  
8. What are some of the benefits that accrue to us when we're honest in our dealings with others?
  
9. What kind of "fear" are Verses 5 and 11 of Chapter 5 speaking about? Why were the people seized with fear (read what Psalm 111: 10 say about this)?

## ***APPLICATION***

- Identify one area in your life where you are prone to exaggerate or perhaps mislead others, and examine the possible motives for your behavior before God in prayer. Also examine who gets hurt besides God when you are dishonest in this area of life.
  
- Pray that God would help you to be honest in the small matters of life so that you're prepared when the big test comes your way.
  
- Spend a few minutes considering how your relationship with God is broken when you are dishonest in any way, and seek His forgiveness for any dishonesty that has broken your relationship with Him (you may also find the Holy Spirit prompting you to seek the forgiveness of others where acts of dishonesty that have damaged your relationship with them). I John 1:9 assures us that God is ALWAYS "faithful to forgive us... and to cleanse us from our sin."