

TAKE YOUR BIBLES, PLEASE...

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (Colossians 1:9-12 ESV).

The Mesquite trees I came to admire and know in West Central Texas, near and west of Fort Worth, Texas were survivors. They actually thrived under difficult weather conditions, including droughts, tornadoes, and "Blue Northers" which in Texas are cold spells that bring strong north winds. Many ranchers hate the Mesquite because it takes water from the soil that's needed to grow grass for cattle. They wage war against them, dousing them with chemicals and oils, burning them, pushing them up with bull dozers. The ranchers are usually successful, for a while, but in a few years little Mesquite shoots start popping up in fields, just a foot tall or so at first. Before long, those shoots are covering a pasture.

The Mesquite is well adapted to a difficult environment. Its leaves are small and wax coated to conserve water. During extreme droughts, Mesquites may shed their leaves to further conserve moisture and preserve the core. In years with good rains, they actually bloom, attracting insects, especially bees necessary for pollination. Their seeds have a protective coating that can last for years until temperatures and water conditions are right again. Their branches have thorns that protect them from desert predators. They put down strong root systems, both laterally and deep into the ground. A Mesquite tap root can reach 150 to 200 feet below the ground. This gives them a competitive advantage over other plants when water is scarce, like during a drought.

I suppose if I were to use a tree as an illustration of Christian character, it would be the Mesquite! In the Christian life the roots of the tree would be the clear knowledge of God. Without roots that are deep and strong the tree itself is threatened. Just like all trees, especially the Mesquite, the deeper the roots go the stronger the tree becomes. **The Apostle Paul uses a similar illustration to help us understand Christian character. He cites four large "branches" of the tree. This becomes a clear description of Christian character.**

First, Christian Character Includes Fruitfulness in Good Works (v. 10a).

The apostle writes, *bearing fruit in every good work*. This is the basic mark of genuine Christian character in a life that is worthy of the Lord. **The tense of the verb in this statement calls attention to the fact that it is a continuous part of the life.** There will always be this fruit. The tree of Christian character is the type that bears fruit for every season.

Further, the fruit borne by the tree is called a "good work." This work is a work of energy, actions, and excellence in life. Good simply means they excel; they are distinguished as good. "Every" means they are of all kinds.

The Apostle John helps us with this concept in his vision of heaven. Remember he saw a tree with twelve kinds of fruit throughout every season of the year:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; **also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month.** The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:1-5 ESV).

The Christian is of that variety. There will be a fruit of good works to the glory of God suited to the need at every season of the year. This is true Christ-likeness. Jesus was always ready for the work as the moment presented itself.

It is also important to remember that these works are the fruit of the Christian life and not the cause of it. We are saved by grace through faith, but it is the type of grace that will manifest itself in making life full of good works to the glory of God. It is as reasonable to expect to see deeds of goodness in the life of a Christian as it is to find apples on an apple tree. Any time you fail to find such fruit on a professing Christian, you can know that either the tree is sick or it is giving a false profession.

Second, Christian Character Includes a Growing Knowledge of God (v. 10b).

Paul writes, "...and increasing in the knowledge of God." This is the second element in Christian character. It may seem rather strange in that growth in knowledge would be included both as the root of the tree of Christian character and as one of the branches. But this is just the way the Christian life is experienced. Paul probably has in mind the growth of the size of the tree here. **The growth is to be continuous. Again, for "knowledge" he uses the word for clear or full knowledge. Instead of a clear knowledge of His will, here the realm of the growth is the knowledge of God himself.**

- ✚ ***This ought to remind us of something very basic about our knowledge of God. It is always partial.*** While a Christian can confidently declare they "know" God; they can never claim to know all of God. God is infinite. Because of the infinite nature we can only know a part of God. The wonder of this truth is that God has made himself accessible to man and we may continually learn more about him. Our knowledge of God can grow.
- ✚ ***This growth is not through memorization of Scripture, though that certainly is a good practice.*** You may learn all the great things about the attributes of God; however, this does not mean you will *know* God. You know God personally, or you do not really know him. The Christian growth is a growth in this personal experience with God.
- ✚ ***This growth in the knowledge of God will be accompanied by obedience, love, and faith.*** The more you know God, the more you will desire to obey him, love him, and trust him. This growth is the basic element in the Christian life.

Third, Christian Character Includes Spiritual Strength to Bear Suffering (v. 11).

Paul says, *May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.* This is the branch of spiritual strength. The strength is the spiritual power residing in the glory of God. Surely this strength is more than adequate. . It points to the full omnipotence of God. The same power that allowed God to merely speak and bring into being all of creation is available to us in our trials!

This is how it is manifested in our lives. So much of the talk about the power of God today surrounds the work of miraculous signs and wonders many people claim to have done and seen. Of course, God still works miracles of healing today, but the real power of God is in sustaining us through our suffering, not saving us from it! This is the patience James talks about in his letter. It is being able to bear up under difficult circumstances. It is being able to conquer these circumstances. It is remaining faithful to your calling regardless of what happens. It is being able to walk without complaint concerning the wrongs that come your way. It is "longsuffering."

Longsuffering is the ability to bear with difficult people. It is the patience that is so often absent when we must deal with people. It is being able to take their wrongs without seeking to retaliate or being overcome by resentment. Paul qualifies both of these words with "all." God is to provide the strength that will produce all endurance and longsuffering. **Further, it is with joyfulness.** This puts things into another light entirely. Some people endure, but their demeanor and behavior is anything but joyful!

The radiance of the life of Paul bears witness to the possibility of such character. Though he suffered like few men have ever suffered, he never lost his radiant joy.

Fourth, Christian Character Includes Thankfulness to God (v. 12).

Like the other qualities Paul lists, gratitude is also continuous. True Christian character is marked by a consistency of gratitude. This "giving thanks" is just a manifestation of the grace of gratitude. It is directed to the Father. Though we will not explore it now, the Christian always has good reason to be thankful for the Father. He is the source of every good and every perfect gift. All grace and peace come to us from Him. Paul continues to enumerate some of these blessings of grace that have come to us from the Father. In this context all of them are spiritual.

Without this gratitude toward God you have something less than Christian character.

Each of these four elements belongs together. Though we have considered them separately, they do not appear in life separately. They will always be blended together into a perfect whole. If one of them is missing, what you have is less than Christian character.

Another interesting thing about this character is its wholeness. It affects a person's relationship with those about him. They will receive the goodness of his life in works. It affects a person's to himself in terms of the inner spiritual knowledge of God and the ability to bear wrongs of life through inner divine strength. It affects his life toward God in terms of the gratitude that is expressed toward God. This is a whole life.

But, let's put character in contest. It is not the product of human effort. It rather is the product of the life being filled with the clear knowledge of the will of God and the life being committed to the doing of that will. These branches are vitally related to the root.

Horace Greely quotes a little poem by an unknown author:

Fame is a vapor,
Popularity an accident.
Riches take wings.
Only one thing endures,
Character.