Building Character

First in the Sept. 2018 series; “Life Skills for Happiness and Success”

# Scripture: 2 Peter 1:1-11

# Key Thought: Continued development of godly character produces satisfying and fruitful lives.

# Intro:

John Wooden, the legendary UCLA basketball coach, once said, “Ability will get you to the top, but it takes character to keep you there.”

During September, we'll be investigating life-skills that will help us to be happy and successful in life. Just as there are skills for playing ball, baking muffins, making quilts, building a bookcase or most any other undertaking, there are also underlying skills for living day to day. People who are happy and successful learn these character skills well. People who are not happy and successful often have not learned one or more of them leaving key deficiencies in their character.

Ideally, while we are growing up, most of our activities conspire together to teach us the crucial life-skills we need. For example, when we play a sport, we are not just learning the sport. We are learning character skills like getting along with different people, encouraging others, doing our part well, teamwork, paying attention to and submitting to the leader, learning to handle setbacks, learning to handle victory, etc. While we are learning to play piano, we are not just learning piano, we are learning the benefits of perseverance, the benefits of self-discipline, the role of practice, how to listen to a mentor, hand-eye coordination, hand-ear coordination, among other things. While we are at school, we are not just learning to read, we are also continuing lessons begun at home regarding conversation -- learning what kind of conversation is acceptable and unacceptable, what kind of conversation is helpful and which is unhelpful; and hopefully learning when it is better to speak and when it is better to be quiet.

One of the problems of our world is that learning character life-skills is mostly an unconscious process. We mostly live our lives concentrating on life's immediate presenting curricula, so-to-speak -- playing a the baseball game, sitting through math class, getting dinner for the family, going to a party, teaching a Sunday School class, doing our social studies assignment, taking our dance lesson, getting dinner, playing golf with our friends, driving to work, doing laundry, taking a trip, etc. We are rather oblivious to the underlying character formation that is happening whether we recognize it or not. Peter goes so far as to liken this lack of perspective on our part to being "near-sighted and blind" (2 Peter 1:9). Peter is reminding us that the process of character development that is going on either well not so well all the time on our lives is more important in the long run than the individual events of our lives. So, it is a good thing for us in the family of God to be more aware of the process of character development, to be more conscious of it and to talk about it. We are perhaps more aware of this as happening in the lives of children. But the process of character formation continues to go on in our adult lives as well, right up until the day we die.

In our September series we are going to make a conscious attempt to zero in on some of the key life-skills that we need to continue to develop in order to find success and happiness in life. Keywords for the next four Sundays starting this morning are: "Character," "Friendship," "Courage," and "Discipline."

# Dangers of neglecting character development

Our passage today contains some stunning warnings about the disastrous results of neglecting to develop character life-skills.

## Corruption in the world caused by evil desires (1:4)

Look first at the situation that underlies the description of 1 Peter 1:4. Peter teaches us that as we build character we are escaping something undesirable. We are escaping being corrupted by our own evil desires. The concept behind this verse is that we live our lives amid a tension between the work of building character on the one hand and being pulled on the other hand into the vortex of our own fleshly desires. This latter attraction is ever with us; indeed, it derives its power from the fact that it usually grows from legitimate human desires which are then twisted by selfishness. But we all know that if we yield to the cravings of our carnality we go downhill.

This is not the only place in the NT where this tension is pictured. Peter had already mentioned this contrast in his first letter as he spoke of the aim of a Christian to avoid the pitfalls of evil desires and instead live for God.

As a result, he [the Christian] does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do-living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.” 1 Peter 4:2-4 NIV

The Apostle Paul thought in the same way. He admonished the Christians at Ephesus to grow in character.

 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Eph 4:22-24 NIV

Writing to Timothy, Paul described the process of our character growth under the guidance of God’s Spirit.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age… Titus 2:11-12 NIV

So, if we are not careful to continue growing in character, we go backward, and the result is not pretty. But if we listen to Peter’s teaching, the picture is much improved.

## Danger of being unproductive (1:8)

There is a second grave danger of failing to develop in character. It is found in verse 8. Failure to grow results in being “ineffective and unproductive” as Christians. Now that is not what we are setting out to do, is it. No, we all want to make a positive difference. But sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that we can relax, take it easy, take the easy path, and still make a difference. It doesn’t work that way. There is a real danger that by lack of diligence and focus, we can be unproductive.

Dr. John Maxwell is the number 1 leadership expert in the world. He began his journey as a Christian pastor. In his book “The Success Journey” gives this definition of success:

Success is…
Knowing your purpose in life,
Growing to reach your maximum potential, and
Sowing seeds that benefit others.

You will never exhaust your capacity to grow toward your potential or run out of opportunities to help others. (The Success Journey p. 11)

Maxwell makes it obvious that from a leadership standpoint, continued development is essential to a successful outcome. There are two outstanding features of John’s definition. First, you can never be successful and then stop and rest on your laurels – there is always more to do reach your potential and to sow seeds that benefit others. Second, you don’t have to wait to be successful. You can be successful today.

Jesus said,

If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:5 NIV

So, from a spiritual standpoint, the kind of fruit that lasts, fruit that comes from the Holy Spirit’s influence in our live, also requires that we keep on keeping on with Jesus. If we don’t we will not bear fruit as Jesus desires.

## Not to develop is to forget and neglect God's work on our behalf (1:9)

Peter also gently admonishes us that if we do not show due diligence to continue to grow in our spiritual lives, building our character with God’s help, then truthfully, we do not understand the purposes for which Jesus has forgiven us and adopted us into God’s forever family. While Jesus certainly wanted to rescue us from the clutches of Satan’s influence, and he certainly desires that we enjoy abundant life as John 10:10 says, he is looking for fruitfulness.

Jesus said,

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last… John 15:16 NIV

God didn’t save you just so that you could be comfortable. God saved you so that you could be fruitful.

# God’s resources for developing character

The second important item to note in this passage has to do with the resources that Gods has provided for our continued growth in character.

Think of the project kits that we sometimes get. I have her a Lego style kit for my grandson. It has all the parts needed for this project. Here is another example, a needlepoint kit of my wife’s. It contains all the pieces of the various colors of thread that you need that you need to complete the project.

Now God has handed us a big project in encouraging us to build our character. But here Peter is given us an awesome assurance.

## God has given us everything we need 1:3

Consider the inclusive and blanket promise in verse 3.

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. 2 Peter 1:3 NIV

I loved the older 1984 NIV version which read “for life and godliness” because God has given us in Jesus all that we need both for eternal life and for godly living. That translation provided a good reminder of God’s abundant provision both for our salvation and for our sanctification, our growth in character.

The practical result of this promise is that we have no excuses for not continuing to grow in our character development. God has made sufficient help available.

Side Note on the Translation of Pronouns in 2 Peter 1:3, 4.

The referents of the masculine pronouns in verses three and four of our text are ambiguous in the Greek and most translators intentionally leave them ambiguous in the English as well. The phrasing seems like two different persons of the Trinity are being referred to. We cannot help but ask, “Who has given us everything we need and who has called us? Which pronoun refers to God the Father and which to Jesus?”

Fortunately, we are aided by cross references. My current thinking is driven by looking up NT verses about the one who calls us (1 Peter 1:15, 16; 1 Peter 5:10; Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:9; 1 Thess. 2:12). All of these verses agree that it is God the Father who calls. This fact and noting that Jesus is the last person mentioned in verse two lead me to clarify v. 3 this way,

"Jesus' divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of God who called us by his own glory and goodness."

## God's great promises 1:4

Peter goes on to mention in v. 4 another awesome resource we have for personal growth--specifically the promises of God.

Here again the pronoun is not clear in the context. But I am also helped by a cross reference. Since according to 2 Cor. 1:20, our precious promises are also from God the Father originally. So, I continue verse 4 this way,

"Through these God has given us very great and precious promises so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires."

We can use the promises of God to encourage us in our own growth.

## God's nature in us 1:4

As if these two all-encompassing resources were not enough, Peter makes the case for our enabling even stronger by explaining that the purpose of God’s promises is so that we can “participate in the divine nature” (NIV). Here are three ways to think about what Peter is saying.

1. When we become a Christian, God puts his Spirit in us as his indwelling presence, the “seed” (1 John 3:9) and source of God-like behavior. Peter also uses the “seed” metaphor referring to the Word of God as a source of our rebirth (1 Peter 1:23). By either metaphor, God’s nature is in us through our spiritual birth. God enables us to grow because He has put his Holy Spirit in us.
2. Because we are children of God, we are to increasingly share God’s family likeness, which is holiness of heart and life. The Apostle John understood that God’s family likeness of right-living must express itself in us.

No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. 1 John 3:9 NIV

 The writer of Hebrews phrased the same idea this way.

He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. Heb 12:10 NASU

1. Think of the fruits of the Holy Spirit—love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). These are God’s virtues being implanted into us by the Holy Spirit. In this way we “participate in the divine nature” too.

Friends, we’ve got the resources to keep growing in character, no matter what our age is. We can’t make excuses.

# Building blocks for character development

So how do we develop character and keep developing it for a lifetime?

## Diligent effort (1:5,10)

Twice in the passage, in both verse 5 and verse 10, Peter tells us that diligent effort will be required. Translations of the Greek idiom include “make every effort” (NIV, NRSV), “giving all diligence” (KJV), and “try your hardest” (CJB). Other places this phrase is used include: when we are instructed to maintain the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3); when we are encouraged to be the best workmen for Jesus that we can be (2 Tim. 2:5) and latter in this same book by Peter when he tells us to “make every effort” to be found spotless and blameless when Jesus returns (2 Peter 3:14).

The book of Hebrews says, “solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14). So, character building comes by continuing use of the Word of God and continued grappling with the moral issues of our own day.

Paul said to Timothy,

 “Train yourself to be godly…” (1 Timothy 4:7).

Today we expect the church to train us, the Sunday School to train us, the preacher to train us. But the Bible says, “Train yourself…” It is up to us to be diligent, working with God’s Spirit to sustain our own spiritual growth and character growth. We need to learn to be “self-feeders” – reading and studying the Bible for ourselves, searching out the topics we need for our own growing points, praying about our character challenges, listening for God’s Word to speak to us.

Paul continued in writing to Timothy,

 “Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress” (1 Timothy 4:15).

That sounds like the same advice Peter is giving. “Make every effort!”

Spiritual growth and growth in character will not happen automatically.

## Strengthening godly character step by step (Add 1:5)

Peter then gets extremely practical and gives us a list of virtues which we can work to add into our lives, step by step. One might argue that the list is in some kind of ascending order as it begins with the catch-all Greek virtue -goodness (Gk arete), next is “knowledge” to which the Greeks also aspired, penultimate is brotherly love which was to characterize the church, and last is the climactic Christian virtue – love (agape).

But the key verb in verse 5 is that little word “add.” It speaks to me of step by step, day by day being aware of our own growing points and listening to the voice of the Holy spirit and then applying Scripture to our lives.

For example, if we are feeling challenged in the area of telling the truth, we can look up Scriptures on truth or honesty, print them on cards and put them on our bathroom mirror to read daily, or put them on our computer background. During my last pastorate, there was a stretch I was specifically feeling challenged in the area of faith. I had the phrase “And God is able…” in 3-D on my computer screen. If I stopped working momentarily, that phrase would come up gently undulating in front of me to remind me that faith means remembering that God is able. Those words are also the first words of a key verse I had memorized (2 Cor. 9:8 NIV) that helped me to think of the divine resources that are available to us as Christians. I was diligently trying to grow.

**Steps for growing in character**

1. **Be aware of your current growing edge**
2. **Find Scripture, other Christian resources, or a Christian friend or counselor to help.**
3. **Listen to what God says through his Word to you.**
4. **Practice making choices that are needed to walk to the truth discovered.**
5. **Growth often comes through accepting God’s challenging assignments**

Today you can look at your computer app – YouVersion and search for a plan on a topic that you feel is a growing edge for you. For example, this summer, I was going through a some mildly blue days, for some unexplained reason. I was being a little grumpier than I should be too. So, I looked up some plans that dealt with subjects like anxiety, sadness and finding hope. I completed three such plans to help myself stay joyful and faith-filled.

I found this Hi and Lois cartoon that I think helps make the pint. Lois grows in compassion and love because of the unexpected challenge of helping Hi with his report card crisis.



## Look to the reward - a rich welcome (1:11)

Lastly, Peter motivates us by speaking of God’s rewards.

### Spiritual Character Strength

There is an earthly dimension to the results Peter promises. He tells us that if we do these things we will not “stumble” or “fall” (depending upon the translation). This is just common sense. The more we work at walking with Jesus, the less likely it is that we will walk away from Him. It doesn’t mean it is impossible. In this life, we can never reach a spiritual height from which it is impossible to fall. But while we are being diligent, we are not falling, we are moving closer. And as long as we are moving closer, “pressing toward the mark” (Phil. 3:12) as Paul put it, we are not falling away.

### Eternal rewards

Finally, Peter reminds us to look for the ultimate reward. We do these things, we stay motivated to walk in God’s ways because we are looking for something – something that is still “out there” -- something that is yet to be revealed.

Peter says we are looking for a “rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11).

The book of Hebrews says we, like Abraham, are looking for a “city with foundations whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).

When Paul sensed that his martyrdom was near he wrote to Timothy,

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:7, 8 NIV)

Peter reminds us all to let our anticipation of that great day motivate us to keep on keeping on; to keep growing in our faith; to continue maturing in our character; to keep valuing the fulfilling of the good works prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10).

Then we to can look forward to hearing our Master say, according to the teaching of Jesus himself,

 “Well, done, good and faithful servant…enter into the joy of your Master”
 (Matt 25:21, 23 ESV).