

discipleship essentials

Essentials for Spiritual Leadership Study Guide

CHRISTIAN CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

LESSON 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF GODLY CHARACTER

INTRODUCTION

This lesson is part of a Disciple Essentials module titled Christian Character Development. When Christians fail and ministries fall apart, it is often due to a lack of character development in the leader. A Christian leader must take character development seriously, because discipleship requires that we grow in Christ-like character. This module examines a number of Christian character traits that are necessary for developing servant leadership. We will look at what the Bible teaches about these traits, and examples of Jesus and others displaying them. Godly character should be evident in the life of every follower of Christ, especially those who are leading others.

The Study Guide is intended for an individual to look deeper into a specific lesson on their own. The lessons can be used in conjunction with other Discipleship Essentials materials, such as the video and audio productions found on www.discipleshipessentials.org.



CHRISTIAN CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

LESSON 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF GODLY CHARACTER

WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

This lesson outlines the importance, nature, and development of Godly character, and how a lack of it can lead to failure in serving God effectively.

JUST SO YOU KNOW...

Character is what we do in secret, when we think no one is watching. It defines who we are; it is our true self. Having a good character means we are becoming more like Jesus Christ – but we're not there yet. In fact, character building will last our entire lifetime. We will leave our ministry and our family behind when we die, but our character will be remembered. Character differs from personality. You may have a shy or outgoing personality, you may be thoughtful or spontaneous – those are personality traits. Character traits are not natural inclinations and must be learned over time. As we submit to the Holy Spirit's work in us, our character will become more Christ-like.

GETTING STARTED

1. What does the word 'character' mean to you?

2. What character traits have you picked up from your parents? Was there ever a time when you looked up to someone (perhaps a parent, sibling or teacher) and tried to imitate them? What was the result?



STUDY

❖ **HAVING A HEART FOR GOD:** God wants to use people like us to carry out his amazing plan on earth: reconciling people to Himself who were once His enemies! But in order to be useful servants in the kingdom of God, we must obey Him and have the right heart attitude. Christians must work to develop Godly character; it is an important aspect of personal discipleship.

- **What is Godly Character?** This is what we are talking about when we use the phrase ‘Godly character’:
 - Godly Character is evident when our attitudes, our thoughts, our intentions and our desires are Christ-like.
 - Godly Character is more than knowing right from wrong and having a sense of ethics or morality. It is choosing good over evil even when it is inconvenient.
 - Godly character puts God first, others second, and ourselves third.
 - Godly character embodies the praiseworthy traits mentioned in the Bible, including the fruit of the Spirit, which displays the nature of Jesus Christ to the unbelieving world.
 - Godly character is what God desires for each of us!
- **Being Conformed to the Image of Christ:** As we undergo the process of sanctification, we are becoming more and more like Jesus Christ. This should excite and delight us! Jesus was not excluded from life’s trials, and neither will we as we follow His example. What do these verses say about God’s desire for us to be like Jesus?

Romans 8:29	
2 Corinthians 3:18	
Romans 12:2	
Colossians 3:9-10	

- **The Character of Jesus:** In order to become like Jesus, we must know more about who He was, and what His character was like! We do this by reading the Bible regularly, and spending quality time with Him in prayer. Read the following verses and discuss the character traits described.



Colossians 3:12-15	
1 John 4:8	
Galatians 5:22-23	
1 Corinthians 13:4-13	

- If someone asked you what Jesus was like when He was on earth, how would you describe Him? What was His character like?

❖ **WHY GODLY CHARACTER MATTERS:** It may not matter to most people what our true motives and intentions are as long as we are law-abiding and keep to ourselves. If we don't do anything 'too bad', we are acceptable in the world's sight. However, God wants us to become more like Christ. Why is this?

- **Godly Character has Eternal Value:** Just as we work hard at learning a new language, acquiring a new skill, or training our body for a specific task, we must work at building our character. Our character has eternal value! We were made to serve God forever as 'royal priests' (1 Peter 2:4-12, Revelation 5:10).
- **Godly Character Qualifies us for Godly Works:** When God wants someone to serve Him in a specific way, He calls the person whose heart is close to His (or a person "after God's own heart", like David in the Old Testament). Good character ensures the work will continue, that it will not be undone by sin or selfish decisions. Our character reveals whether we are willing to live our lives God's way or our own (1 Samuel 16:7, Acts 13:22).
- **Godly Character Can't be Faked before God:** God holds each of us accountable not only for our actions, but for our inner life as well. We may easily fool people, but not God. Because our heart is laid bare before Him, nothing is hidden from His sight. Jesus frequently rebuked people who posed as holy, but whose hearts were far from God. Jesus pronounced woe on them; they expected a blessing (Luke 12:2, Matthew 23:25-26)!



- **Our Character Determines our Future Choices:** We become what we habitually do. We prove to be truthful by always being honest. We prove to be joyful not only when times are good, but when we endure hardships with an attitude of thankfulness to God. Character reveals what we are likely to do in the future. Decisions, choices, thoughts and words flow from our heart. To be used by God, it is important that our character is like that of Christ (Matthew 12:35, Proverbs 4:23).
- **Our Character Reveals Who we Love:** We can either put God and His desires first in our life, or we can elevate ourselves. Selfishness is the root of many vices and character flaws. It reveals that we love ourselves more than God; this is disobedience and idolatry (Proverbs 11:20, John 14:15).
- Can you think of other reasons why Christian character matters and why it is important in discipleship?

- ❖ **VIRTUES, MORALITY AND CHARACTER:** Worldviews disagree about the nature of humanity – whether it is mostly good with the capacity for evil, or truly evil with the capacity for good. Worldviews and religions even differ on the nature of virtue and morality, which is why it is important to know what we mean by those words, and where our standard for expression comes from.
 - **Virtues** are expressions of individual good character traits, rightly carried out. They are neither deficient nor extreme, but precisely what we strive for in aligning our character with Christ's.
 - **Morality** is the system of beliefs we have about good and evil, right and wrong. For those of other worldviews there are differing ideas.
 - **Character** is a developed response to do what is right even at the expense of our own desires or comfort. It requires intentional action, deliberate choices, and discipline. When we are evaluating our actions, we must ask ourselves if what we are doing is *right* and *good*. We may use questions to evaluate our own motivations such as:
 - Is it done out of love for God first?
 - Is it done out of love for others second?
 - Is it done with self-control, or rooted in selfishness?
- ❖ **HOW CHARACTER IS BUILT:** None of us is virtuous (or of perfect character) by nature. But we can become virtuous by making right choices. Think about learning a second language, using it exclusively until your mind thinks in that new language, and then preferring it over your native tongue. God is concerned with building good Christ-like character in each of us, and helps us in



the process. We can work with God and accept His training as He builds our character in many ways:

- **Choices:** We make a hundred small decisions every day – how to respond to someone who is aggravating us, how we behave in traffic or at the market, how we think and how we speak. God gives us many opportunities to choose virtuous behaviour and an attitude in keeping with His character. This may take a period of time before we have any level of comfort in doing so. We learn to be virtuous by our choices. What do the following verses tell you about your choices and their impact on your character?

Luke 16:10	
Joshua 24:15	
Proverbs 16:9	

- **Challenges:** It is through our struggles and challenges that God hones our character. If we never faced adversity, our character would never be challenged! It is easier to be generous out of abundance than when our possessions are scarce. It is easier to be truthful and courageous when we are not threatened, than when we are in danger! But practising virtue in difficult circumstances is how our good character is proven. What do the following verses say about the effect of challenges to our character?

James 1:2-4	
1 Corinthians 10:13	
Jeremiah 12:5	

- **Community:** God uses other people to continually help us become more like Christ. Our friends can improve our character or hinder it – depending on the company we keep! While we must always look to Jesus alone as our perfect example, we can learn much from Christian men and women who have been following Jesus longer than we have. In addition, our character is often developed through people who test and try us, more



than through our circumstances. It is easy to think of how patient and compassionate a person we are, until we meet someone who is in need at an inconvenient time! What do the following verses tell us about the role of community in our character development?

1 John 4:19-21	
Philippians 2:3-4	
James 2:14-17	

❖ **EXAMPLES OF CHARACTER DOWNFALLS:** God’s Word is more than a series of moral stories or cautionary tales. Every word in the Bible is also useful for training in godliness, including those stories that we might wonder why they are there (2 Timothy 3:16). The following Biblical accounts demonstrate the outcome of poor character. It can be the downfall of a leader, and turn a life headed for greatness to despair.

- **Samson:** God called Samson to defeat the enemies of His chosen people, and Samson was given supernatural power in order to do the job. Samson was able to perform amazing feats for God, but he did not surrender his entire life to God as he was supposed to.
 - o Samson was persuaded to reveal his secret by a woman who seduced him into breaking the Nazarite vow (Judges 13:7, Numbers 6:6). Women were a weakness for him, and because of this he did not reach his full potential.
 - o Samson’s weakness was his inability to put God’s will before his own desires. Samson had plenty of courage, but lacked integrity. Samson was proud and did not recognize God’s authority in his life.
 - o God’s angel revealed that Samson would ‘begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines’ (Judges 13:5), but during his lifetime they were not delivered. If Samson had not been weak of character, he may have been able to do much more for God!
 - o In the end, Samson regretted his choices and eagerly desired to serve God with all his heart. For this, God gave him one last portion of strength (Judges 16:28-31). It seems this intention in his heart qualified him to be remembered as a man of faith (Hebrews 11:17, James 2:21).
 - o How would you summarize Samson’s character? If his character had been different, how might his story have been different?



- **Solomon:** Solomon was a man gifted by God with unsurpassed wisdom, but he lacked good character. Unlike his father, King David, who left a glorious legacy, Solomon’s reputation was shameful. He was the second child of David and Bathsheba, and was loved by God from his youth. He married the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh as a political alliance, but could not control his desire for the love of many women. Solomon acquired 700 wives and 300 concubines, including foreigners whom God had forbidden Israelites to marry. These women lured Solomon from a devotion to his God into worship of false gods and idols.
 - o Solomon was not faithful, self-controlled, or humble. He put his own desires before God and his followers. He was not acting in virtue, but rather indulged in excess. However, he did accomplish some good things during his reign, including building the temple, securing peace with neighbouring kingdoms, and writing the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes and some of the Proverbs and Psalms (1 Kings 3:7-9, 1 Kings 11:1-6, Nehemiah 13:26).
 - o In the end, he did not repent and return to God, but turned to the world and selfish pursuits. Solomon had wisdom, but not strong character in other ways.
 - o How would you summarize Solomon’s character?

- ❖ **COMMITMENT TO THE HEART OF CHRIST:** Having good character is mandatory for every Christian – especially leaders. Developing Godly character is a commitment to the heart of Jesus Christ. It is putting God's ways and the best interests of others before our own.



SUMMARY

- ❖ Christian discipleship is not complete without the development of our Christian character.
- ❖ Godly (or Christian) character is evident when our attitudes, thoughts, actions, intentions and desires are Christ-like.
- ❖ Godly character has eternal value – and qualifies us for future work in this world and the next. It cannot be faked before God, and it reveals who we really are.
- ❖ Character is a developed response to do what is right, even at the expense of our own desires or comfort. It requires intentional action, deliberate choices, and discipline.
- ❖ Character is built by God through our choices, the challenges we face and our community. We should be willing participants and choose to act in ways that God desires.
- ❖ When our Christian character is not developed, we become ineffective leaders and less useful to God. We also miss out on the fruit and blessings He gives.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When has a particular character flaw in your life prevented you from serving God? Do you know of someone who failed in ministry because they lacked Godly character? What were the circumstances? Did they learn from their fall?

2. Some people think that we should just 'be ourselves', and if we try to be otherwise, we are dishonest. Do you agree? If we are not naturally virtuous, is it wrong to work at being virtuous until it becomes second nature?