

Family Bible Series for Jan. 22: Focus on right things, focus on God

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Focus on right things, focus on God

- Matthew 15:16-20; Proverbs 4:23-27, 6:16-19

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Corporate executives lie and steal from employees and receive promotions. Professional athletes accused of serious crimes are given multimillion dollar contracts. Political leaders guilty of ethical misdeeds are re-elected.

These are just a few examples of how western society has bought into the idea that one's personal life and character are separate from, and in some ways less important than, one's ability to perform job tasks. As long as an athlete can out-perform the competition, little concern is given to his or her life off of the field. As long as a politician supports the "right" or popular causes, the public is not concerned with the way he or she relates to family or conducts business.

Words like "character" and "integrity" seem to have disappeared from the vocabulary of the general population or, in some circles, are seen as quaint

and archaic concepts. Yet from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible consistently teaches that a person's character and integrity are vitally important and should be prized and zealously guarded. Both the sages of the Old Testament and Jesus emphasized that God was far more concerned with the conditions of a person's heart than with the person's external characteristics and abilities.

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Matthew 15:16-20

The Pharisees were experts at the performance of religion. Believing that righteousness was made up largely of external piety, they had become the undisputed masters of fulfilling the letter of the law.

On numerous occasions, Jesus confronted the Pharisees with the fallacy of this belief. Jesus taught that within the kingdom of God, true righteousness was not a matter of doing certain things in a certain way while avoiding other things. True kingdom righteousness is an issue involving the heart of the person.

The Pharisees were extremely concerned with maintaining personal ceremonial cleanness and purity by avoiding at all costs anything that may have been "unclean." This meant strict adherence to a specific diet and ritualized washing. Jesus did not dispel the need for being clean and undefiled. Jesus simply taught that such uncleanness was a matter of

having proper attitudes and motives rather than a measure of external hygiene.

In Matthew 23:23, Jesus again emphasized this when he affirmed the Pharisees did well in paying their tithe but neglected the more important issues of justice. Clearly, Jesus understood and taught that a person's character was vitally important. While one should seek excellence in his or her work, within the kingdom of God, the more important issue is the type of integrity and character one develops.

Proverbs 6:16-19

Jesus' teachings concerning the importance of character were certainly nothing new within Jewish tradition. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is full of instruction about developing godly character.

Perhaps the clearest examples of this are in the book of Proverbs. Within this book the sages frequently emphasize the value of being a person of character. In chapter 6, the writer presents a list of seven personal characteristics which stand as an abomination to God.

As with the words of Jesus, these have less to do with a person's abilities than with the condition of the person's heart. This certainly never was intended as an exhaustive list but provides the reader with a clear idea of the types of things which are most important to God. This list includes deceptiveness, pride, violence and manipulateness. Each of these qualities poisons a person's heart and diminishes his or her character.

Within the Christian, such characteristics also can do great damage to one's witness and bring disrespect on the church. God wants people who have put the old nature with its host of flawed characteristics to death in order to develop a depth of integrity and character that properly reflects

that of God.

Proverbs 4:23-27

While there are many who may understand the importance of character, many attempt to develop that character by seeking to do the “right things.” In the kingdom of God, God does not ask his people to do all of the right things in order to achieve a character which would be acceptable to God. Indeed such attempts would simply be another version of the external piety sought by the Pharisees.

Instead, God simply asks us for an unwavering focus on him. Each person should have a clear vision of the goal of true inner righteousness on which we fix our eyes. While each person should be sure to do the things which enable us to reach the goal such as a daily time of Bible study and prayer and regular fellowship with other believers, nothing should take our focus off of the goal of true Christ-likeness.

We should not do those things as an end in themselves or simply to be doing them. They are merely the steps to reach the goal. This takes a measure of self-discipline and self-control, but even these qualities are energized as we continue to focus on the goal and allow God to work in us to develop a godly character. We do this because we know that in the eyes of God, character matters.

Discussion questions

- Have you faced a situation where character mattered more than ability? What happened?
- What are you doing to develop a Christ-like character?

- Based on this study and considering the list in Proverbs 6 as a guide, what might be on a list of seven things which God loves and looks for in us? Decide on a plan for developing those characteristics in your life.



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