

Southport Presbyterian Church
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Christian Conduct and Character
Philippians 1:27 (NIV)

“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.”

Today we continue our series on discipleship by looking at Christian conduct and character.

Recently I received the following email from All Pro Dad, an organization for dads that Coach Tony Dungy is involved in: “Presley Edwards, the top man at A. G. Edwards thirty years ago, said, ‘In order to succeed in business you need two things – fifty times more start-up money than you think you’ll need and the smartest people you can possibly hire.’”

“Presley’s son Ben, the recently retired A. G. Edwards’ CEO, mused, ‘I still agree with my dad’s first point, but I’d have to adjust the second one. These days we can hire all the smart young people we want. We have to look a whole lot harder for character. The temptations are so much bigger and the moral ability to handle them seems so much more limited...’”
“Character trumps intelligence.” (“All Pro Dad,” Feb. 2, 2009)

The Apostle Paul would heartily agree with these words and this assessment—“Character trumps intelligence.” For example, you can be the most intelligent person in the world, but if you don’t have character, it will mean little. You could discover or invent something that is brilliant and would impact the business of your company, but if you don’t have character to guide how your discovery is used, it could turn out to be a disaster for everyone involved.

George McDonald writes concerning character: “Foolish is the man... who would rid himself or his fellows of discomfort by setting the world right, by waging war on the evils around him, while he neglects that integral part of the world where lies...his first business—namely his own character and conduct.” (Quoted by Gordon McDonald in *A Resilient Life*, p. 63)

Gordon McDonald writes, “Character is a word that describes the... person I am over the long haul in life. The person who emerges in the most difficult, challenging moments. Character identifies the attitudes, convictions, and resulting behaviors that distinguish my life...in most situations. ...Character, then, is the deep current of what we are day after day.” (Gordon McDonald, *A Resilient Life*, pp. 61-62)

In our Scripture lesson, the Apostle Paul writes these important words that speak about conduct and character. **“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” (Philippians 1:27)** William Barclay writes on this verse, “...the Philippians must live worthily of their faith and profession... On this occasion Paul uses a word which he seldom uses in order to express his meaning [for “conduct yourselves”]...politeuesthai which means *to be a citizen*... Wherever you are you must live as...a citizen of the Kingdom of God.” (William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, Revised Edition, pp. 29-30)

Our conduct and character reflect our citizenship as members of God’s Kingdom. Yet as Dallas Willard has said, we, as American Christians, have separated salvation from character. (“The Great Omission,” *Defining Moments*, Willow Creek Association 2008)

In other words, we don't see that one of the results of being saved is living a life of character. We, as Christians, must live like citizens of the Kingdom whose lives reflect Christian conduct and character.

As we examine Paul's words in **Philippians 1:27** and what they mean for us today, we see the following.

First, we see that conduct and character are all a matter of the heart and reveal whether our hearts are aligned with Jesus Christ as citizens of His Kingdom. **Proverbs 4:23** says, "**Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.**"

As one scholar notes on this verse, "If we store up good things...in our hearts, our words and actions will be good." (*NIV Study Bible*, p. 951)

Jesus also said in **Matthew 12:34**, "**For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.**" Our heart is either aligned with the Lord, or it is aligned with the world. If it is aligned with Jesus, if its love and loyalty are to Him as King of our lives, we will then seek to please Him by living lives that are a reflection of being a citizen of His Kingdom.

Our hearts, if we follow Jesus, will reflect a heart different from that of the world. It, indeed, will show we are new creatures as Paul says in **2 Corinthians 5:17**.

Character and conduct flow from the heart and show whether we rule our hearts or Jesus rules and lives in our hearts. Paul says in **Galatians 2:20**, "**I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.**" Jesus lives in our lives as His followers. He is on the throne—not us.

One insight that struck me recently concerning the federal bailout of some businesses and CEOs taking huge salaries and bonuses despite their company and the nation's economy falling apart is what their actions revealed about their hearts. If these CEOs had truly been thinking of others and not themselves, they would have turned down their multi-million dollar salaries and bonuses. They would have said, "I cannot take or accept this money. I don't need all this money to live, especially when others in the company or in the country are losing their jobs or having pay reductions. Let's take this money and try to help them." Had that been the spirit of the CEOs, think of the difference they could make!

For Jesus Christ said, "**To whom much is given, much is required**". (**Luke 12:48**) If Jesus Christ were reigning in their hearts, the outcome would have been far different.

Second, Christian character and conduct not only honor Jesus and are worthy of the gospel of Christ, they stand out in a dark world. Paul writes in **Philippians 2:14-15**, "**Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.**"

As Jesus said in **Matthew 5:14-16**, "**You are the light of the world...Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.**"

Our Christian citizenship should shine in the darkness of the world we live in. It will stand out. As I have shared with our missions teams going to a different country, we may not speak the same language as the people there, but we do speak the language of Jesus which is understood everywhere. When Christians' character and conduct reflect Jesus and are worthy of Him and the Gospel, people take notice. We do shine like stars in the universe.

Last Sunday after church, Pastor Ali from Turkey shared with our family the changes Jesus brought in his life after Jesus appeared to him in a dream. He had been an alcoholic and beat his wife everyday. The transformation that his wife saw in him, after he met Jesus, led her to the Lord. His children also became Christians. His mother however remained a holdout until a few years ago. One Sunday she stood up in church and said, “Your God is my God. I have been worshiping the wrong god (Allah).”

Since Pastor Ali’s mother could not read, Pastor Ali asked her, “Do you want us to teach you to read so you can read the Bible?” She said, “No, I have read it in your life.”

Pastor Ali’s character and conduct stood out! His life indeed was a shining star in the dark world around him!

It is also important again to remember that becoming more Christ-like in character and conduct is a process. It “is about becoming a person who matches... the words of Jesus.

“...[It is] a life-journey in which one walks in the ways of Christ and gradually becomes more like Him in conduct and inner orientation.” (McDonald, *A Resilient Life*, pp. 59-60)

Someone has said, “I am not yet a Christian, but I have seen them.” (McDonald, *A Resilient Life*, p. 59)

May we be people growing in Christ-like character and conduct, and may we also be people whom others, when asked if they have seen a Christian, can point to us and say, “Yes, I have seen them.”

Finally, it is important to see that conducting ourselves “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,” will put us on a collision course with the culture around us. The early Christians encountered this. For example, in **Acts 17**, Paul gave a brilliant and respectful presentation of the Gospel to the leading thinkers of his day in Athens. But hear their response in **Acts 17:32-34**: **“When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’... A few men became followers of Paul and believed.”**

Note the response of some--they sneered at what Paul said. Why? Because we are on a collision course with the world.

Recently Pastor Steve Matthies shared with me a newsletter from a former college professor. It is entitled: “The Revolutionary Effect of Doing the Right Thing,” and concerns a group of young people in Nazi Germany in the 1940s.

“The White Rose... was the name of an underground student newspaper printed in Nazi Germany in 1942 and 1943... Nearly all the students [who were friends and were part of this underground student newspaper] had initially and eagerly embraced the Hitler Youth... As the War advanced—and with it the students’ knowledge of German atrocities in the East [along the Russian Front]—this carefree circle of friends hardened into a more intimate, focused, and dangerous camaraderie. The nucleus of the group consisted of two siblings, Hans and Sophie Scholl, and their friends Christoph Probst, Alexander Schmorell, Willi Graf, and their philosophy professor, Kurt Huber. These and a select group of siblings, friends, and trusted associates—no more than twenty individuals total—were convicted that they must do something, no matter how insignificant and perhaps even futile... to break the ... code of silence imposed by the Nazis... A newspaper—in reality only a two-page leaflet—was conceived, named “The White Rose.”... Only six leaflets were produced, the first in summer 1942 and the last in February 1943. They all tried to awaken—or *encourage*—students...to

pursue and defend truth and justice. The students of the White Rose believed that Nazism must sooner or later fail... [and] ... The White Rose contended that the only power sufficient to cleanse and rehabilitate Germany were the spiritual and moral forces of the Christian faith...

“The Gestapo [eventually caught] all the conspirators... the six members of the White Rose mentioned above were sentenced to death for high treason... Other members of the group were later executed, and those that were not were shuffled between Nazi prisons and concentration camps for the remainder of the war...

“The students were all in their early twenties... From the Nazi perspective a small brush fire had been routinely and imperiously extinguished. The case seemed closed and doomed for oblivion...

“... [Yet] scores of books have been written about the White Rose... providing at least one point of honor for Germans, and especially young Germans, who look for something redemptive from the Nazi era. Inge Jens, author of a book on the White Rose, [said] that this...student effort provided Germany with a fundamental moral seed of democracy when the democracy of West Germany was formed in 1945... after the fall of Nazism.

“The fellowship of the ring of the White Rose did not think of themselves or their efforts in terms of “heroism.”... They were simply friends who sought... to speak their mind, to declare truth, to decry injustice... The White Rose conspirators had integrity, and their integrity has changed the world. Integrity is doing what we should do and can do... If we believe God honors the righteous... then we can never underestimate the revolutionary effect of simply doing the right thing.” (James R. Edwards, “The Revolutionary Effect of Doing the Right Thing,” *the Edwards Epistle*, Winter 2009, Vol. XVII, No. 4)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, part of discipleship is developing Christ-like character and conduct in all that we do. Our character and conduct reflect our heart. It shines in the darkness. It puts us as citizens of the Kingdom on a collision course with our culture as it did for The White Rose. We are called to live lives that truly honor Jesus, not ourselves, not our cause, not our political party or position in life, or to please people. Nor do we live such lives to gain success, because often such living does not bring it. We live such lives of Christian conduct and character for one reason, and one reason only, to honor Jesus, period.

As one Christian writer said, “We don’t develop character because it brings success; we develop it because it is the right way, the God-pleasing way to live. One lives by the Bible whether or not things turn out the convenient way.” (McDonald, *A Resilient Life*, pp. 65-66)

Amen.