

Christians Under Construction:
Using the Best Materials
Galatians 5:16-26

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September 7, 2003

Within my earthly temple there's a crowd,
There's one who's humble and one who's proud.
There's one that's broken-hearted for his sins,
And one who unrepentant, sits and grins.
From much corroding care I would be free,
If I could just determine which is really me.

Life is a choice. Day by day we make decisions which shape the character of our lives. The habit of good conduct is an indispensable element in the construction of a good life. So what does it mean to be a good person? What do good people have common? How can I construct a good life? Come, let us consider these questions of character on our way to Holy Communion today.

CHARACTER IS A MATTER OF PERSONAL INTEGRITY.

Where I came from, my father could borrow any tool from any neighbor whether or not they were home simply because he was trustworthy. They knew he would not only take care of it, he would bring it back. He borrowed money from the local bank with only his personal signature as collateral because the bankers knew he was as honest as the day was long. Things have changed since then. We now rent our tools from Home Depot and sign hundreds of papers to establish a mortgage. There are all kinds of laws governing our transactions. Can regulations ever replace personal integrity? Are we as trustworthy as those who've gone before us?

A friend observing Mae West's string of pearls exclaimed, "My goodness, where did you get those pearls?" Mae replied, with a twinkle in her eye, "Goodness had nothing to do with it."

What's goodness got to do with it? Who needs the truth when the truth can be broken? When it comes to character, goodness has everything to do with it. What kind of world will we have if everyone simply does what is expedient in his own sight?

Each of us has a story to write on the tablet of time. Day by day we add a chapter, a verse, a line. When the plot thickens and the struggles deepen, are you a person who walks in the light and lives by the truth and practices integrity deep in your roots?

When your children grow up to be like their heroes, would you rather they follow

the example of David Robinson or Kobe Bryant? Both are great basketball players. David Robinson just spent nine million dollars to open a school for inner city kids in San Antonio, Texas, while Kobe Bryant will spend at least that much defending himself against a sexual assault case with a 19-year-old in a Colorado hotel room, with whom he has already admitted committing adultery.

Paul said life is a struggle. We are constantly dealing with take-over bids fueled by desires, addictions, anger and the forces of evil. But we are called to keep in step with the Spirit. We are called to resist temptations of immorality, impurity, and debauchery by enjoying the fruit of the Spirit which is love, joy, peace. Character is a matter of personal integrity.

CHARACTER IS A MATTER OF RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY.

Sister Mary Mercedes, a Dominican nun, back in 1910 wrote a little book entitled, The Art of Living with Yourself and Others. In it she said, “Be gentle and kind. Be simple in your tastes and sincere in your actions and let everything you do and say be governed by this timeless rule: Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Sounds simple doesn't it? Maybe too simple for our complicated world. Maybe that's what we need the most.

I remember sitting in this sanctuary in shock of the worst terror to hit American soil since the Civil War, praying not only for safety, mercy, and grace, but for the intervention of God into the affairs of people. I remember how vulnerable we all felt as much of our security came tumbling down with those Twin Towers. I remember praying, “Lord, help us rise from the ashes of this tragedy to build a better world. For it's not with swords loud clashing or roll of stirring drums, but with deeds of love and mercy that the heavenly kingdom comes.” While the government has responded with big guns and big talk, people have quietly moved toward a kinder, gentler, understanding of community. Therein is our salvation.

Teens are realizing it takes more than a good education to be a good person. As one Harvard student wrote, “The very qualities that I recognize as essential to getting me here are those qualities I least like in others, and since we are all alike, at least at the level of ambitious self-achievement, we do not know how to like one another or to live with one another. This place is intensely selfish.”

A teenager coming off summer mission trips wrote: “Thanks to my experiences through the summer, I realize that all teenagers have the power to make a difference for ourselves and for our communities. If people gave us a chance to help out, I think the world would be surprised at just how committed teens can be in improving the world around us, because we are, after all, the future.”

Peter Gomes says in his book, The Good Life, “The success of every culture hinges not on the big points of morality, but on the smaller ones, like being considerate of others and pulling your own weight. These values are neither legally enforceable nor purely private, but constitute the connective tissue of people

interacting in a healthy society.” That’s why we ask Christians Under Construction to find one kind, unselfish deed to do for another each day. It kind of makes you think, doesn’t it?

I spent a couple days in the hospital this week, which was certainly not on my schedule. At four o’clock in the morning they came in to get the trash cans beating them like drums. At five o’clock they came in with a big chair to weigh me. I said, “I know how much I weigh. I don’t need you to tell me at five o’clock in the morning.” I happened to get put in a room with a person who snored the loudest of any human being on earth. I found myself in the middle of that suddenly remembering, “But you made a commitment. You made a commitment that you would try to practice random acts of kindness.” Instead of being my impatient patient-self that came naturally to the surface, I found myself taking a deep breath and trying to go with the flow of the day. Maybe it is in the random acts of kindness that the world will find a better way. Character is a matter of an internal decision. It is something way down in the depths of your heart where you choose to be a certain kind of person. People of character take on relational responsibility. They seek the common good.

CHARACTER IS A MATTER OF SELF-CONTROL.

A family member pulled the covers over his head as the alarm sounded on Sunday morning signaling the time to get ready for church. “I’m not going to church today,” grunted the sleepy member of the family. “Oh yes you are,” replied the mother of the house. “Give me one good reason I should go to church,” said the sleepy head. “I’ll give you three,” replied the lady of the house. “One, it’s Sunday. We always go to church. Two, people will be there who are expecting you, and three, you are the pastor. You are paid to go.” There are good reasons we do not always do what we sometimes feel like doing. It’s called self-control. Rollo May called it a matter of the will. The will is the capacity to organize one’s self so that movement in a certain direction or toward a certain goal can take place.

During the time I pastored a church in Lexington, KY, Jeb McGruder was a colleague of mine, serving First Presbyterian Church in that city. You will remember the name of Jeb McGruder from the Watergate break-ins of the 1970’s that tumbled the presidency of Richard Nixon. People often asked the one-time politician now turned pastor, “How could such a bright, young, good, well-educated American have gone so badly wrong?” Jeb would reply, “We simply lost our moral compass.”

Self-control does that for us. It keeps us morally tethered to the right when we are greatly tempted to do the wrong. People capable of great good are also capable of great harm.

Oskar Schindler was the German businessman who daily risked his life to save 1200 Polish Jews from the gas chambers. After the war, this noble heart

abandoned his wife, became a womanizer and a drunkard, fell into destitution and dependence on others. He even pawned the commemorative gold ring that was fashioned for him from the false teeth of those he rescued. Oskar Schindler was not a man of self-control.

It takes people of character to build lives that really matter. Character is not a sudden blaze of glory won, it is the accumulation of days in which good deeds are done. Paul says character is a matter of putting off and putting on. In one of his famous lists, he put it like this: Put off sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, self-ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. Put on the fruit of the Spirit which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Do you want to build a life that really matters? What are the things you need to put off and what are the things you need to put on? After all, the materials you use, make all the difference.

Amen.