

THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST

What exactly is God like? What things does He love and what does He hate? And does it make a difference? Do we need to love the same things that He does?

The answer is a resounding “Yes”! The true God of Heaven is our Father. And if we are His sons and daughters we should look like Him, especially spiritually, because God is Spirit. In fact, the Bible says we are being changed into His image from one degree of glory to the next (*2 Cor 3:18*) and loving the things God loves is one of the keys to this process.

And what does God love? For this we need only look at Jesus, for He is the image of the invisible God. Jesus said, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (*Jn 14:9 RSV*) and as we get to know Him, we will discover the heart of God.

HIS IMAGE

There are five main elements of the character of Christ that should be evident in the life of every believer. They are:

Grace
Truth
Purity
Humility
and Material Simplicity

The first thing evident in the life of Christ is grace. Grace is giving someone favor they do not deserve. This favor takes many forms such as love, kindness, forgiveness, generosity, sensitivity, patience, and compassion. We see this particularly in the life of Jesus in John chapter 8 where a woman caught in the act of adultery was brought to Him. The Law required that such a woman be stoned to death, and the crowd demanded Jesus’ answer. Jesus in turn said nothing, but stooped down to write on the ground. When they continued to question Him, he stood up and simply said, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” Then one by one, beginning with the eldest, they all slipped away. Jesus turned to the woman and said, “Has no one condemned you?” She answered, “No one, sir.” Then he said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and leave your life of sin.” (*NIV*)

If Jesus had relied on the Law alone, the woman would have been put to death, but by extending grace to her, Jesus saved her life and was able to speak with authority as he told her to leave her life of sin. And this is the heart of the Gospel. God does not treat us as our sins deserve. He is patient toward us, not desiring that anyone should perish, but that all should come to repentance. (*2 Peter 3:9*) And through the blood of Jesus, God offers forgiveness of sins to those who repent and turn to Him. This is grace in action.

One aspect of grace is especially important because it is the very essence of what God is. I John 4:16 says, “God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God in Him.” (NIV) Thus love is the most important thing that God would have us do.

Jesus said, “A new command I give to you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (Jn 13:34-5 NIV)

This means that no Christian should presume to live His life without regard for other people. Rather, love shows itself by taking an interest in people around us; being patient and kind (especially with the unlearned and lowly), being generous and willing to share, forgiving others as God forgave us, and making every effort to live at peace with all men – especially with those who are of the household of faith. (Col 3:13, Heb 12:14, Gal 6:10)

The Bible also points out that love is not rude or self-seeking, it does not boast, and is not easily angered. In short, love does no wrong to its neighbor and should be the heartbeat of all we do as Christians. For without love, all of our activity is little more than a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. (1 Cor 13:1-7)

Jesus even calls us to love our enemies (Lk 6:27-36), and for many people that may be the hardest of all. Yet, the key is knowing the Father’s love for us. For when we know His love, His care, His promises, and His protection, we can give to those who don’t deserve it, knowing that we ourselves have received much more from God, and because of His love we will lose nothing in the end.

Thus love begets love. We love because God first loved us. And as we become His instruments of grace in this world, we encourage others to respond the same way. This is one way of sowing to the Spirit that in due time will produce good fruit.

TRUTH

Truth is telling things as they really are. It is required in the words we speak and the deeds we do. It is also a fundamental aspect of the character of Christ and the nature of God. The Bible says “God is not a man that He should lie, nor a son of man that He should repent. Has He said and will He not do it? Has He spoken and will He not bring it to pass?” (Num 23:19 RSV) Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life,” (Jn 14:6) and the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Truth who will lead us into all truth. (Jn 16:13)

Truth, therefore, is part of the nature of God. It is a foundational principle on which the universe is built, and it cannot function properly without it. And it is because of God’s truthfulness that we can trust Him. It makes His word and promises sure.

Satan, by contrast, is a liar and the father of lies. (Jn 8:44) When we lie, we open ourselves up to the devil and act as his spokesmen. Thus, as followers of Jesus, there should be no lying, cheating, or stealing among us. (Eph 4:25-29)

To walk in the truth means living our lives in honor and integrity, making our “yes” mean “yes” and our “no” mean “no”. It means keeping our promises to others, not taking things that belong to others, and handling every situation with justice and fairness.

As the Bible says,

“Do not lie to each other since you have put off the old self with its practices,”

“Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor,”
and

“He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his hands.”
(Col 3:9, Eph 4:25, 28 NIV)

But note that truth and grace go hand in hand. Truth without grace is a deadly weapon that can hurt people deeply, while grace without truth leads only to deception and dishonesty. Neither is the character of Christ. But when we live our lives speaking the truth in love we participate in the divine nature that is in Christ. For the law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. *(John 1:17)*

PURITY

Purity is keeping our bodies and souls free from anything that would defile, pollute, or enslave us. Jesus said, “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a man and make him ‘unclean’.” *(Mt 15:19 NIV)*

Drunkenness, tobacco, and drug abuse are other things that fall into this category because of their addicting nature *(1 Cor 6:12)*. The Apostle Paul said, “It is for freedom that Christ has set you free; do not submit again to a yoke of bondage.” and “Do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh.” *(Gal 5:1 NIV, 5:13)*

Many sins of the flesh are listed in Galatians 5:19-21 and one area of special note is that of sexual immorality. God created sexual relations to be an expression of love between a man and a woman who are married for life, and in this context it becomes a beautiful, life-giving experience that glorifies God. But sexual activity outside of this union becomes selfish, destructive, and under the control of evil spirits. Its end is the Lake of Fire. *(Rev 21:8)*

The Scripture tells us to avoid the very appearance of evil, and it specifically cautions us against sensuality and self-indulgence. *(Eph 4:19, Jas 5:5)* It tells instead of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, of which one important aspect is self-control:

“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, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” *(Titus 2:11-13 NIV)*

Jesus is our example in all of this. The Bible tells us that He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin. (*Heb 4:15*) This is particularly evident when Jesus was in the wilderness right after his baptism. Despite being tempted with food, riches, and an open display of his power, He resisted them all, answering each of Satan's temptations with the Word of God. (*Mat 4:1-11*)

We are called to do the same. As the Bible says,

“Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.” (*1 Pet 4:1-2 NIV*)

Repentance is the starting point for all of this. As we make a conscious choice to reject the things that offend God, and choose instead to embrace the things like purity that bring joy to His heart, we fall out of agreement with the evil spirits that have until now tempted and influenced us, and this alone breaks much of their hold on our lives. And in those cases where evil spirits have begun to possess or control us, as Christians we can break their hold and command them to leave, and thus can become truly free as Jesus promised. (*Jn 8:32*)

HUMILITY

Humility is the opposite of pride. It is admitting our weaknesses and faults, and being known for who we really are. It starts with being truthful about ourselves.

In addition, humility recognizes that all we are, and all we have, is by the grace of God. There is nothing we can take credit for because even our gifts and talents are given by Him. Humility realizes that everyone is equal in God's sight, and there can be no comparing of ourselves to one another to see who is higher or lower. In fact, humility takes the lowest place and leaves recognition or exaltation solely in the hands of God.

And this is the example of Jesus,

“Who being in very nature God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on the cross!” (*Phil 2:1-11 NIV*)

To those who know and love God, there is nothing more beautiful than someone who walks in the same way -- in humility of heart without pretense or show. Jesus said, “He who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (*Lk 14:11*)

The Apostle Paul said, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (*Phil 2:3-4 NIV*) Thus, humility is really love in action.

Humility is not a matter of beating yourself or continually putting yourself down. That only leaves you focusing on yourself, and “self” is the whole root of pride. Instead the answer lies in forgetting yourself entirely. Focus on Jesus Christ, and live to do His will in this world. In this way self is put to death, and Jesus and His glory become the goal and fruit of our lives.

SIMPLICITY

Finally, our lives must be free from the love of money and material possessions for the Bible says the love of money is the root of all evil. (*1 Tim 6:10*). It is clear from the Scriptures that Jesus did not lay up for himself treasures on earth. He said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head.” (*Mt 8:20 NIV*) In fact, Jesus warned against the accumulation of possessions, saying,

“Do not lay up for ourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (*Mt 6:19-21 NIV*)

The Bible says our lives are but a vapor and we do not know whether we will be here tomorrow, or whether God will call us home tonight. It remains therefore to do the good we can, while we can -- to give to the poor, to lend expecting nothing in return, and to promote the advancement of God’s Kingdom on the earth. In short, we need to make our money and goods fully available for God to use to the praise of His glory. For as Jesus said, you cannot serve both God and money. (*Mt 6:24 NIV*)

SOME KEYS

So how can we do this?

The first answer is that you must want to. If we just try to do God’s will out of obligation or duty, it will become a drudgery or chore, and we will eventually fall prey to any doctrine or temptation that will justify our heart’s secret longings. But when we love the things that God loves, then doing them bring us great joy, while doing the opposite will bring us great distress. And this is simply a decision you need to make. Do you “love” love, or just tolerate it? Do you love truth, or do you do it only when you have to? Is purity something you delight in and rejoice to see? Or is it simply a commandment that you are forced to follow?

What you love will determine your future. And what you love is simply a choice you make. Putting self to death in order to do the will of God can either be an awful experience of daily crucifixion that you try to avoid, or it can be a minor price that you gladly pay in order to let Jesus being seen in you. It all depends on the love of your heart. *Deciding* to love what He loves is the beginning.

Second, start putting your decision into practice. Start taking whatever steps are necessary to implement your decision to become a man or woman of love, truth, purity, humility, and material simplicity. Get rid of things that have caused you to sin, change your ways and habits, and apologize to people you have wronged in the past. Some of this might be hard as the pleasures and benefits still appeal to your flesh. But when you give up the right to those things for the sake of gaining Christ, you will find that God will become all that much more real to you.

Will you fail again at some point? Probably. Growing in Christ is sometimes like a small child learning to walk. He tries, he falls, he tries again. But soon he is running and jumping freely. The same is true for us. As the Lord convicts us of sin and we begin to do His will, at times we fail and sin again, but there is no point in hiding our sin, condemning ourselves, or giving up. Instead, admit that you aren't quite as spiritual as you thought you were. Repent before God and ask His forgiveness, and then try again. Step by step you should see the Lord building His character into your life, and the sins that once controlled you no longer do.

God is a forgiving God. The Bible says, "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (*1 Jn 1:9 NIV*) And if God loved us and called us to be His own when we were still in our sins, how much more will He love us and receive us now that we have believed in Him and been born of His Spirit! (*Rom 5:9-11*) This gives us great confidence as we learn the way of this new life.

The instructions of the Bible are not mere suggestions or unrealistic standards that no one can follow. They are commands that God clearly expects us to do. If you don't know the root of your problem, and it keeps recurring despite your best efforts, ask God to show you what is happening and why. He will help you. In one way or another, He will bring His answer to you and the deliverance that is accomplished will be His work, not yours.

God has given us something in Christ that no one else in time or history ever had – the presence of the Holy Spirit within us to set us free, give us hearts that really love Him, and the ability to do His will.

Seek these things until God answers. Freedom from sin is something God wants you to have. It is why Christ died for you.