

Living the larger life:

By Robert C. Crosby

***“Man looks at the outward appearance,
but the Lord looks at the heart”***

— 1 Samuel 16:7, NIV

“God is more concerned about our character than our comfort.

His goal is not to pamper us physically, but to perfect us spiritually.”

— Paul W. Powell

Actor Robert Redford was walking through a hotel lobby when a woman saw him and eagerly followed him to the elevator. “Are you the real Robert Redford?” she asked him. As the doors of the elevator closed, he paused, and replied, “Only when I am alone!”

In a culture too often captivated with living a “larger life” in the eyes of everyone else, Jesus calls us to live “life to the full” (John 10:10) in the eyes of God. And that life is built not on fame or fortune, but on godly character.

God is searching for people who will live the larger life. He wants people committed not only in word but also from the heart, from the soul. He’s looking for the “real deal” — for people serious about living life the way He always intended it to be lived.

Living the larger life means having a big enough *view* of God. We need a view of God that is big enough to make Him Lord of all we are and do. John the Baptist said it this way: “He must increase and I must decrease” (John 3:30).

As we learn to live life God’s way,

something happens within us — godly character emerges. We grow spiritually. With God’s character alive within us, we truly are in private what we profess to be in public.

The twig in the cement

While digging the foundation for a new church in Kingston, Jamaica, I learned a lesson about character I will not soon forget. I was the least experienced in construction, so I depended on the directions of my skilled co-laborers. After digging several yards of ditches for the foundation in the sweltering tropical heat, we finally started to pour the cement.

As I spread and packed the muddy mixture with a rake, a tiny twig fell from the bank and into the cement. Thinking nothing of it, I continued to spread the hardening substance and just patted the twig into the mix. The moment I did, our crew chief shouted at me, “Get that twig out of there!” I obeyed the order but couldn’t understand all the fuss over something so small.

“Don’t you know?” the crew chief asked. “That ‘little twig’ would disrupt the integrity of this whole building.” When I asked what he meant,

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he said, “It would make the mixture impure and create a weak point in the foundation.”

“What harm would that do?” I inquired.

“Plenty!” he said. “It wouldn’t cause any noticeable problem right away, but in a year you’d see a hairline crack in the wall, and in a few years the entire wall could collapse. All from that ‘little twig’ you allowed to fall into the mixture.”

You might say that living the larger life of godly character involves keeping the “little twigs” out of the mix. A larger life requires a larger soul.

The nutrients that grow a soul are clear — prayer, Bible study, exercising faith and forgiveness, walking faithfully through life’s struggles and challenges, fellowship with other believers, and keeping our eyes on Jesus and His example.

The things that threaten a soul, however, include the many “little twigs” that can weaken and fragment us. They are the character compromises we are so often tempted to make — the spiritual shortcuts, setbacks and shortcomings we allow to get into the mixture of our lives.

Godly character can best be described as integrity. Our word *integrity* is actually derived from the Latin word *integer*. In English, integer is defined as “a whole number; a complete entity.” Therefore, the essence of integrity is wholeness, sameness or oneness. Integrity, in a practical sense, includes genuinely being in private what you profess to be in public. A person of integrity is the same through and through. The “mix” is consistent.

Warren Wiersbe has said, “Two forces are at work in our world today: (1) God is putting things together, and (2) sin is tearing things apart. God wants to make integers; Satan wants to make fractions.”

Godly character is powerful. Integrity is one of the soul elements that

authentically reflect Christ to those around us, that make Jesus real to others. Just think of it! Through our words, people may hear God’s voice; through our character, they just may get a glimpse of His face.

Accumulating twigs

The “twigs” of life are not limited to invisible character traits. They can become pretty obvious to the people around us in the form of the material things we accumulate.

God’s Word is full of promises to bless those who live according to His standard. There’s nothing inherently wrong with material possessions. Large homes, new cars and fashionable clothes can all serve God’s purposes. The danger comes when our focus shifts from God to any of those things.

Perhaps the most compelling illustration of this truth is found in the Gospel account of the Rich Young Ruler. Mark 10:17-22 describes his encounter with Jesus this way.

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good — except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’ ”

“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. (NIV)



Imagine that man's quandary. He had approached Jesus with what he thought was a simple question. And it was a question to which he thought he already knew the answer. He was already doing everything Jesus mentioned.

But Jesus saw that the material side of the man's life was strangling his spiritual vitality. The young man's possessions had become the twigs in his spiritual cement.

A larger life

Daniel was someone who lived the larger life. He is not remembered so much for his personal accomplishments as he is for his impeccable character. He was thrown in the lions' den not because of doing something wrong but because of doing something right (Daniel 6:1-4). The Bible says he had "an excellent spirit" (Daniel 6:3, NKJV).

Fellow administrators were threatened by Daniel's uprightness. They followed him and spied on him. The trouble was they could not find any skeletons in his closet. No dirt under his rug. No dipping into the petty cash. No hanky panky. Simply put: Daniel was a large soul among small ones.

Integrity was not just another part of Daniel's personality — it was the essence of his person. It gave him direction, as well as depth of character. "The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity" (Proverbs 11:3, NIV).

Daniel was one of the top officials in Babylon with much responsibility. Still, he spent time with God daily. "Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before" (Daniel 6:10). He didn't turn to prayer in panic — instead he maintained a consistent and private prayer life. He kept his knees calloused, his hands busy and his nose clean.

The tests of integrity

David said, "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity" (1 Chronicles 29:17). What types of challenges actually put our character as Christians to the test? The Bible points out two.

First, there is *the test of trouble*. Proverbs 24:10 says, "If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength." It is easy to boast of integrity when all is well, but we must cling to integrity when troubles come. And to do so, integrity must be worked into our lives long before the trouble comes.

At 40 years of age, Ted Williams was winding down his career with the Boston Red Sox and suffered a pinched nerve. That year he was the highest paid player in sports, making \$125,000. The following year the Red Sox mailed him the same contract.

Williams sent the contract back with a note requesting a 25 percent pay cut. His reason? "My feeling was that I was always treated fairly by the Red Sox when it came to contracts. I never had any problem with them about money. Now they were offering me a contract I didn't deserve. And I only wanted what I deserved."

Williams, in effect, cut his own salary by more than \$30,000 — quite a sum in his day!

Was it upright character or downright foolishness? What would you have done? Unfortunately such character seems hard to come by in today's world, doesn't it?

The second challenge to integrity is *the test of prosperity*. "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise he receives" (Proverbs 27:21).

Years ago my father was a produce buyer for a major grocery store chain in the South. Disappointed with the poor quality of fruit a certain distributor was delivering, he was on the verge

of canceling their contract.

My mother had made it no secret that she would like to own a VW convertible Beetle. One day after yet more shipments of fruit had arrived late, a representative from the failing fruit distributor strolled up to Dad's desk with a set of keys. You guessed it! The "bug" was sitting outside and Dad would have only to renew their contract to drive it home and surprise Mom.

What would you have done?

I am proud to report that my father said a swift "No!" to the compromise. He kept the "little twig" out of the mix. In my eyes, he passed the test that day with flying colors (the most ironic part is that his superiors at that time thought he should just take the car).

Your character is too important to overlook and neglect. It is threatened every day by the "little twigs." Your integrity is not only tested by troubles and blessings, it is put on display amidst them both. Integrity is often seen by others in our public lives, but it is always seen by the eyes of God in our private lives.

God calls us to follow the road of uprightness. The road to acquiring His character is paved with difficulty. It involves struggle. Often, it involves battle. There are forces that work desperately to subvert and fragment our new life in Christ. But for those who are faithful, God promises the strength necessary to overcome. The responsibilities of godly character are large, but the life it produces is larger still. ■

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