

**Leadership Principles & the Pastoral Epistles – 2015**  
**WEEK 6: PURSUE GODLY CHARACTER**

**Comment on “Slave vs. Child” homework assignment:**

When you realize you’ve been serving as a slave, there are 2 wrong reactions & 1 right reaction. The wrong reactions are: keep serving as a slave &/or quit serving/desert your post. The right reaction is: ask God to help you get back under grace to serve as a child, while staying at your post.

**Interpretive comments on 2 Tim. 2:19b-23**

Now Paul shifts from the content of the leader’s teaching to the quality of his character. Read 2:19b-22. And he shifts metaphors from two different kinds of road-cutters to two different kinds of vessels or utensils in a mansion. Some vessels are for noble uses that bring honor to their owner (FINE PORCELAIN VASE), while other vessels are for ignoble purposes that bring no honor to their owner (TOILET BOWL; GARBAGE CAN).

The analogy is obvious—we will either be used by God for his noble purposes and glorify him, or we will be used by our sin-nature and bring no glory to God. The condition is that we develop godly character. Notice the clear connection between this and fruitful ministry (“if a man cleanses himself . . . he will be a vessel for honor . . . useful to the master, prepared for every good work”). There is an indispensable connection between your continuing character development and effectiveness in leadership (cf. 1 Tim. 4:12,16).

Inanimate vessels have no choice about what they are or what purpose they play. But we can all choose to be vessels that are greatly used by God and bring him much glory (2:21). No past sins, unfortunate family upbringing, difficult life circumstances, etc. are insuperable obstacles. The one condition is that we cooperate with God’s sanctifying work in our characters. We are to do this aggressively and decisively, by *abstaining from* wickedness (2:19) by *fleeing from* youthful lusts (2:22), and by *pursuing* righteousness and faith and love and peace (2:22).

**Why is this so important?**

This element is closely linked with the command to “handle the Word accurately.” Leaders must not only *teach* God’s grace and the lifestyle of love that should result from grace—they must also *demonstrate* (and make evident progress in) this way of life. The authority of God’s word of the gospel, coupled with the moral authority that comes from godly character, are the two most powerful aspects of Christian spiritual leadership! Your character can validate the content of your teaching and *inspire* people to give themselves to Christ. Or your hypocrisy (commissive or omissive) can *repel* people from Christ and the gospel. Of all roles, this is the most “either-or” in terms of polarizing spiritual impact. This is why Paul says “Pay close attention to yourself and your teaching” (1 Tim. 4:16), and why character is paramount in Paul’s requirements for elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3).

No amount of spiritual or natural gifting, etc. can substitute for a lack of progress in godly character. We have seen gifted leader after gifted leader flame out or underachieve because they failed to take their sanctification seriously (EXAMPLES: marriage issues; hiding and tolerating secret sins like porn; material self-indulgence; denying or justifying or ignoring besetting sins). Conversely, if you make progress in godly character, nothing can stop you from being a powerful, Christ-glorifying spiritual influence on others—even if you are not unusually gifted!

**How do we make progress in godly character?**

Paul takes for granted, of course, that Timothy understands his theology of sanctification—which Paul explains in-depth in his letters to churches (e.g., Romans; Galatians; Ephesians). So we will have to refer to them and other New Testament passages to unpack the “how.”

Progress requires “abstaining from wickedness.” This seems to refer to responding obediently to (rather than grieving) the Spirit in his moral leadership of our personal lives. Paul also calls this

a “good/clear conscience” (1 Tim. 1:5,19; 3:9), and he emphasizes this as crucially important to Christian leaders. The Holy Spirit speaks through our consciences both to warn us of the danger of sin and to convict us of sinful behaviors and/or attitudes. Christian leaders must not be “moral mules,” but rather respond like David describes in Ps. 32:8,9.

Are you normally sensitive and responsive to your conscience’s warnings (e.g., AVOIDING TEMPTING SITUATIONS WITH PORN, OPPOSITE SEX; OVER-USE OF &/OR DEPENDENCE ON ALCOHOL, ENTERTAINMENT, ETC.)—or do you blow this off, flirt with sin, etc.?

Do you listen quickly to the Spirit’s conviction about sinful actions and attitudes (e.g., REBUKE OF M. S.; OUTRAGE AT M’S IMPOSITION, ETC.)? Do you normally confess these to God and others without having to be busted? Or do you hide, rationalize, defend yourself, etc.

Do you seek out healthy accountability for your moral life, or do you avoid this?

Progress requires “pursuing” godly character. We cannot be satisfied with mere freedom from disqualifying sins and superficial niceness! Look at the *beauty* of holistic godly character described in this passage (2:22b), and pursue nothing less than ongoing progress in this direction! **(Plantinga, pp. 34-36, goes here)**

“Righteousness” is probably an overall description of the next three, as “godliness” is in 1 Tim.4:7,8. As Paul says in Rom. 6:13, we are to be “instruments” (*haplos* – a synonym for “vessels”) of righteousness.” The following three words unpack the spiritual dynamics that result in this righteousness.

“Faith” refers to personal trust in Christ and his grace not only to make you acceptable to God, but also to motivate and empower you to genuinely love others (Gal. 5:6). It is the opposite of pride and self-sufficiency.

“Love” is sacrificially and freely serving others for their good (1 Thess. 5:15), as God through Christ has loved us. It is the opposite of interacting with others self-protectively or as a means to your ends.

“Peace” probably refers here not to individual peace (Phil. 4:6,7), but to the social *shalom* that results from mutual upbuilding (Rom. 14:19; Col. 3:15). It is the opposite of the disengagement or discord that results from selfishness.

REMEMBER: The issue here is not reaching a perfectionistic standard, but genuinely valuing this way of life and continuing to make progress (1 Tim. 4:15)!! Oswald Sanders asked himself concerning the fruit of the Spirit: “Have I been growing in my love/patience/gentleness *this past week*?” Are you making progress in your character? If not, why not? It may be that you are stuck because you haven’t taken the next step . . .

Progress requires “fleeing . . . lusts . . . with a pure heart.” This may be synonymous with “abstain from wickedness,” but it is more likely that Paul is describing ongoing *repentance from idolatry*. Both “lusts” (see below) and “pure heart” (Ps. 73)<sup>1</sup> are terms related elsewhere to idolatry. We need to understand what this kind of repentance looks like, first for ourselves (so we can become vessels of honor) and for working with others.

Let’s look at another passage that describes this kind of repentance—Jas. 3:13-4:10.

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<sup>1</sup> The “pure in heart” (73:1) are those who are described in 73:25-28. They want God only because God is everything valuable—strength, fulfillment, joy, protection, etc. They “desire nothing on earth”—they don’t seek these things from created things. See also Ps. 24:4—the pure in heart is he “who has not lifted not lifted up his soul to falsehood.” According to Plantinga, this is a reference to the “non-idolatrous.” Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), p. 46.

James points out that their chronic sinful behaviors (fighting with others – 3:16 “disorder;” 4:1) are rooted in a self-centered philosophy of life (3: 16 – earthly, demonic wisdom) and manifested by selfish attitudes (3:14,16 – jealousy; selfish ambition).

James then calls these selfish attitudes “lust” (4:2 – *epithumia*), which means literally “over-desires”—inordinate cravings. Sometimes the New Testament authors use this term positively to describe desire for the things of God (Gal. 5:17 – “the Spirit sets its desire against the flesh”). But it is usually used negatively to describe a sinful craving that is willing to disobey God in order to satisfy itself (Gal. 5:17,19-21; 1 Jn. 2:16).

James then claims that these lusts are actually the expression of idolatry. By calling them “adulteresses” (4:4), he is using an Old Testament metaphor for worshipping idols, thus betraying God as their covenant Lover (cf. Ezek. 16:30-34). 4:5 is likely a reference to Ex. 20:5, where God forbids idolatry because he is a “jealous” God. Since these are Jewish Christians who were not involved in literal idolatry, James is saying that their inordinate desires are actually expressions of an idolatrous heart. Paul teaches this connection between literal idolatry and lusts in Rom. 1:23,24. When we seek what only God can give us (e.g., SECURITY; SIGNIFICANCE; APPROVAL; COMFORT) from created things (e.g., PEOPLE; POSSESSIONS), we are idolaters even though we may not literally worship false gods. See Matt. 6:24, Col. 3:5, and 1 Jn. 5:21 for other New Testament examples of this kind of idolatry.

How can they change? By humbling themselves in the presence of the Lord (4:6). This involves admitting their idolatry as a personal betrayal of God, turning decisively from it. God will respond to this kind of repentance by giving them grace—He will graciously exalt them by breaking Satan’s power over them and restoring His personal presence to them (4:7,10).

Now let’s walk through the “Idolatry & In-Depth Repentance” CHART to take a closer look at what this looks like.

When you have/are helping others with chronic sinful behaviors and/or attitudes that don’t respond to “abstain” and “pursue,” ask God for insight into the idol(s) that is/are driving your sinful behaviors and attitudes (Ps. 139:23,24). To this end, it is helpful to:

Take note of your *inordinate emotional reactions*. When you have an idol and you are failing it, you feel not just disappointment with yourself, but extreme *self-reproach* (e.g., work or academic perfectionism). When your idol is threatened, you feel not just concern, but extreme *anxiety* (e.g., conflict in a codependent relationship). When your idol has been blocked, you feel not just frustration, but extreme *anger* (e.g., blocked home group growth goals). When there is no chance of regaining your idol, you feel not just disappointment, but *despondency* (e.g., parent whose child turns away from God). (The “Idols Worksheet” and “Discovering Idols Project” in this week’s “Glory of the Gospel” reading is an excellent diagnostic tool for this.) *Growing Christians resist the temptation to ignore or justify inordinate emotional reactions, and instead ask God for this kind of insight.*

NOTE: This is not advocating focusing on or following your emotions. It is simply saying that it is important to prayerfully reflect on inordinate emotions because they may reveal idolatrous attitudes.

Ask yourself *why* you commit this sin habitually. What is it that you believe so strongly that you must have that you are willing to disobey God? For example, why do chronically I lie (either commission or omission)? It is usually because I want to get or keep certain people’s approval. I lie because I believe I must have their approval—God’s approval is not enough for me.

QUALIFICATION: This is *not* advocating unhealthy introspection on our own motives, let alone judging others’ motives (1 Cor. 4:6). It is simply saying that it

is important to prayerfully ask God to reveal our motives for chronically sinful actions and/or attitudes. The Bible is full of reminders about the importance of our motives in life and ministry (Matt. 6:1ff.; 1 Cor. 10:31; Phil. 1:15-17).

Once you identify an idol that is driving your behavior and attitude, you can't simply reject it. You must also identify the aspect(s) of God's grace that you don't believe. This unbelief in God's grace is what gives the idol its power. *In-depth repentance involves both rejecting the specific idol and embracing God's specific grace.* To this end:

Think long and hard about how this idol has not only not kept its promises, but has also injured and corrupted you and (through you) other people in your life. It may also be helpful to think about this with regard to other people who have worshipped this same idol. This can motivate you to repent.

Confess to God that you have been worshipping this specific idol, and that you have been guilty of unbelief in this specific aspect of His grace. Admit to God that (up to now) His love has not been enough for you. ("I don't believe that your respect/delight is nearly enough for me. I must have X's respect to be a whole person."). Admit to Him that these sins are *more* sinful than the sinful actions to which these sins led.

Agree with God that Jesus died for *this* idolatry and unbelief. Cast yourself on His mercy and pray: "I do believe; help me in my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:29).

NOTE: If you aren't also cultivating a focus on God's grace, you won't have anything to "expel" with! But if you are unwilling to see and repent from deep-seated idols, you will lose your appreciation of God's grace!

NOTE: It can be helpful to write this repentance process out in a prayer journal. It can also be helpful to divulge this process to trusted friends.

God will often (though not always) lead you to take a specific step connected to your repentance (e.g., confessing a lie; ending a romantic relationship; standing up to an authority or security figure; disciplining a key person).

The fruit of this kind of repentance is clearer insight into your depravity and renewed appreciation of God's grace, the return of vitality in your relationship with God (sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle; including God's peace and hope and joy), *and* (usually gradual but) lasting change in your character and greater motivation to love others.

NOTE: This does not mean that you won't/can't go back to this idol! Growth is usually identifying it and repenting from it more quickly. You will also receive gradually growing insight into how much more this idolatry pollutes your life than you thought. But it's worth it, because you become more humble and godly and more grateful of God's grace!

EXAMPLES:

KELLER'S CASE STUDY ON LYING ("Preaching the Gospel in a Postmodern City")

BROTHER STRUGGLING W/ BITTERNESS: "I must have certain people's respect. God's respect is not nearly enough."

BROTHER WITH SERIAL ROMANCES: "Your delight in me is not even close to being enough. I must be able to continue to attract women to me in order to be valuable."

PARENT WITH A REBELLIOUS CHILD: "Her wrong choices can ruin my life." vs. trust that because of God's loving sovereignty they not only couldn't ruin my life, but that God would work through them to do good to and through me to others

(as he did through Jesus' cross). "Your promise of protection is woefully inadequate. I must have my daughter make good decisions to be safe, respected, etc."

RESENTMENT BECAUSE OF MINISTRY COMPARISON: "Your acceptance and approval and role for me is nowhere near enough! I must be better than others at their best in order to be successful."

ANGER & DEPRESSION BECAUSE OF LACK OF DESIRED RESPONSE TO ATTEMPTS TO SPIRITUALLY INFLUENCE PEOPLE: "I must see this in order to be someone. It is not enough to seek to love others/represent Jesus well—my identity is confirmed or undermined by how people respond (NEGATIVITY BECAUSE OF LOW HOME GROUP ATTENDANCE; SOUR ATTITUDE AFTER WITNESSING SITUATIONS W/OUT POSITIVE RESPONSE)."

FEAR OF CONFLICT IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Do this "*with* those who call upon God with a pure heart." We must have genuine spiritual friends who also want to grow in godly character. Through honest prayer and discussion and encouragement with such friends, you will get more insight into character and how to be godly than you will ever get alone. You will also get encouragement and reminders of God's faithfulness, without which you will wilt. Without this kind of interaction, you *will* stay deceived about the idolatrous activity of your heart (Heb. 3:13).

Closely observe other godly Christian workers (Phil. 3:17; 4:9). This will inspire you to keep making progress, and it will encourage you that it is possible. Ask them what helped them to grow in certain character areas and listen carefully to their answers.

Conversely, be careful about spending lots of time around carnal Christians. We should minister to them, and we should not dismiss them from our lives. But we tend to become like our closest companions (Prov. 13:20), so take note of this!

SPURGEON: "We shall often find ourselves in danger of deteriorating our zeal by the cold Christian people with whom we come in contact. What terrible wet blankets some (Christians) are! . . . If these frost-bitten men should happen to be the officers of the church, from whom you naturally expect the warmest sympathy, the result is chilling to the last degree, and all the more if you are young and inexperienced . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Cultivate and maintain Christ-centered peer friendships! Don't regard these as luxuries that you can't afford because of other ministry responsibilities. These friendships are a stewardship responsibility because they keep you in the race for the distance.

Prioritize meeting regularly (weekly or at least bi-weekly) with such friends. Spend your time catching up on life, discussing what you are learning about God's truth, sharing your burdens, praying and laughing together.

Practice Jas. 5:16 on this deeper level with your close Christian friends. Don't merely confess behavior sins and hold each other accountable. Help each other to repent on an attitudinal level and from idols of the heart. This is often a key to helping stalled-out Christians. This may be why structures that facilitate this are often connected with revivals (e.g., WESLEYAN BANDS).

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Helmut Thielicke, *Encounter with Spurgeon*, p. 83.