

Choosing Character: A diagnostic framework for character assessment

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Choosing Character:

A diagnostic framework for character assessment

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Legendary Dallas Cowboys football coach, Tom Landry, once stated:

I've seen the difference character makes in individual football players. Give me a choice between an outstanding athlete with poor character and a lesser athlete of good character, and I'll choose the latter every time. The athlete with good character will often perform to his fullest potential and be a football player, while the outstanding athlete with poor character will usually fail to play up to his potential and often won't even achieve average performance.



Tom Landry put character at the top of his list for recruiting winning football players. In Christian community we talk a lot about character, but are we following in Tom Landry's footsteps? Are we carefully considering a person's character in choosing our relationships with others – *in marriage, in friendship, in the church, and in the workplace*? To overlook qualities of character is to court failure in our relationships and ventures, and to expose people to unnecessary hurt, disappointment and frustration. To successfully evaluate a person's character we must first understand what character is; then, we need to have the diagnostic criteria to rightly determine that what we see is what we get.

CHARACTER DEFINED:

Unfortunately we often overlook character because we focus on the wrong criteria: *charisma, competency, intelligence, likeability, success, how a person makes me feel, or attractiveness*. These are positive attributes but are not an accurate measure of someone's character. As stated by Gordon-Conwell Professor, Dr. Peter Kuzmic, "charisma without character is catastrophe." Think of character as a combination of integrated traits that reflect personal strength and integrity. Personal strength: *courage, resilience, responsibility, self-control, perseverance, indomitable spirit*. Integrity: *loyalty, compassion, acting on principle, honesty, life balance, and humility*. These characteristics work together seamlessly to represent a person's character; a single quality of character cannot stand alone. If I am in physical danger, a friend's loyalty and willingness to face personal risk on my behalf will be tempered by her courage and compassion. Each quality of character is inseparably related to the others. Understanding how all of these components work together is prerequisite for assessing one's own character and the character of others. Let's look at some examples of the kinds of behavior that reflect strong or, in their absence, weak character.

DIAGNOSING CHARACTER: HAVING THE EYES TO SEE

Much as a physician identifies a medical condition through applying a diagnostic framework, so we can develop a "diagnostic framework" for assessing the character of another. What follows are some of the components of such a framework:

A. FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT. While none of us can say accurately that we "have arrived," nonetheless, strong character will be evidenced by the Fruit of the Spirit in a person's life both in times of trial and success: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. The dramatic life of Joseph comes to mind. He was betrayed by his brothers, separated from his people, falsely accused, and imprisoned. On the positive side, he was restored to a high position and the recipient of much admiration and respect. Throughout the good and the bad, Joseph displayed an amazing ability to be kind, self-controlled, and faithful to his God.

B. MODE OF OPERATION. Working from a sound ethical framework and consistently holding to a standard that supports Biblical principles will clearly indicate where someone is on a foundational level. Key patterns will be prominent: *a willingness to receive input from wise counsel; a desire for accountability; transparency in business dealings; initiative to promote the success of others*.

C. HANDLING EMOTIONS. How someone handles disappointment, grief, injustice, illness, and financial hardship, both reveals and shapes character. When tough times come, opportunities present themselves for strong character to emerge. Imagine what David must have felt toward Saul. Saul had it out for David and David knew it; yet, when David had the opportunity to kill Saul, he did not allow his emotions to rule the day. David based his behavior on principle—Saul was the king, appointed by God.

D. FAILURE. On this side of heaven all of us have less than perfect character and will fail. Strong character is often revealed in failure when we watch how someone handles their mistakes. A person of strong character pursues repentance, transformation and redemption. The words, *"I'm sorry,"* are experienced as true and genuine because excuses and blaming others stops. There is a willingness to deal with the appropriate consequences and a clear grasp of the need to grow and change. Temptations that have caused failure are understood and every effort is put in place to avoid these areas of vulnerability. Old patterns are not repeated and new choices are made that follow God's standards for Christian living.

WARNING SIGNS OF THINGS TO COME:

As we watch a person's behavior, the depth of character he/she possesses will be revealed by the characteristic choices they make. When we do observe a weakness, flaw, poor behavior, or a misstep in another, how do we know if it is innocuous or of an indication of a serious immaturity of character that will undoubtedly result in harm? A person may fall, but in a way that is not characteristic of him. When it comes to assessing character through one's behavior, it is the motion picture of a person's life – not a mere snapshot – that tells the story. Think of David. He committed adultery but was he an adulterer? Abraham also had lapses, but the truth regarding his strength of character was clearly revealed when he obeyed the command to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Consider the following.

I have a dear friend that I can talk to about anything and we thoroughly enjoy one another's company. She is an encourager and one of my greatest fans. She does have one area of weakness that is noteworthy – she is not good at keeping secrets. Over the years I have learned that if there is something of significance that I'm not ready for others to know, I can't tell her. Another friend is great in the financial area – she would give sound advice and manage my funds as if they were her own. In an emotional crisis, however, she becomes critical and unsupportive. Does that mean I dismiss this person? No, but I don't go to her when my heart is broken. In both cases the relationships are valuable as long as I know the limitations and set the proper boundary lines.