

Foundations of Character

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Introduction

And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so.

Genesis 1:11

Read that verse again, and understand that the fruit you produce will be in accordance with the type of tree you are. Furthermore, within that fruit are seeds that will continue to replicate after their own kind. If your character is weak then it doesn't matter how noble your values are. You can say you want to produce better fruit, but your results will remain consistent with your true nature. You can apply quick fixes to these problems, but until that true nature changes you'll always end up back at square one. You'll feel frustrated at working so hard, only to remain stuck in the same old patterns. You'll make a progress for a while, only to revert back to your old ways after a few days or months.

You'll also be taken advantage of frequently. Your lack of depth makes you vulnerable to manipulative people, who prey upon fickle attitudes of the undisciplined. Looking only at the surface makes you easy to mislead, as you lack the wherewithal to discern beyond the most simplistic of observations.

To escape this cycle you must to be willing to do the deep work everyone else avoids. It's time to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty. There are some things in your psyche producing toxic fruit, and they need to be pulled up by the roots before they destroy you. There's an open door to limitless growth and potential, but it doesn't open to those who content themselves with superficial adjustments.

The depths of your character run much deeper than personality or values. You may *date* someone with a good personality, but you *marry* someone with a strong character. The person with a good personality might be fun to hang out with, but won't make a good companion if they can't endure the pressures of commitment.

You may enjoy conversing with a salesman who shares similar *values*, but you do *business* with the one who demonstrates a strong *character*. I might value honesty, fairness, and kindness, but my character determines whether or not I live those values out. We've all met people who say they believe in one thing or another, but their actions suggest otherwise. This illustrates a flaw in their character.

What I want to do in this book is uncover the structure upon which the patterns of your behavior is established. If you are a car, then your character is the frame. A vehicle with frame damage is considered a total loss, because the cost of repair will exceed the value of the car. Correcting a flawed character is also a considerable task, but fortunately, you're not a car. While a damaged frame will produce many issues and be costly to fix, your value as a person is infinitely greater. Having character issues is a symptom of being alive. Rather than throw your life away, I want to teach you some practical steps to begin improving that elusive quality which so few take the time to develop.

"Character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing."

Abraham Lincoln

A virtuous character is the foundation of a strong reputation. Just like there's no shadow without the physical tree, reputation is only sustainable as a byproduct of authentic living. Most people want to treat the symptoms of poor character without addressing the deeper cause, but it's only a matter of time before those superficial solutions breakdown. I want you to learn how to make the real changes that will produce tangible transformation, rather than settling for shadows. Of course, there is only so much you can do on your own. Fortunately, as Christians, we are not in this alone! The moment we accept Jesus as our King, we receive citizenship in the the Kingdom of Heaven, and receive the incredible gift of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is the same one who hovered over the face of the deep in the beginning, and who raised Jesus from the dead. He appeared to the Israelites on Mount Sinai as a terrifying cloud, and spoke to Elijah as a gentle whisper.

The Holy Spirit lives inside of everyone who accepts the gift of eternal life Jesus offered by trading His perfect life for ours. He is our helper, and our advocate. But don't misunderstand what it means for Him to be our helper. This is the Spirit of the King of Heaven. He is not a genie who grants us every random wish and desire that comes to mind. His interest is in producing an unimaginably powerful change within us.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Romans 8:29

As you can see, God's desire is for us to be like Jesus. This is a radical change that affects us to the very core of our being. It is a work that can only be accomplished by the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit. While the true change of character we're after isn't something we can accomplish on our own, God's process is something we can learn to cooperate with. In this book, I want to make the case for making the pursuit of godly character a primary goal in your life, as well as illustrate what that looks like, and some of the benefits.

Some of your character flaws come from the fact that you were born into a sinful nature, and some of these patterns are simply bad habit. This requires change at a deep level, but it's more doable than you might think. Remember that character transcends any one area of life. A lazy person may learn to develop better habits on the job to avoid disciplinary action, but if his character remains unchanged, he will likely still have lazy habits at school or around the house. Behavior modification means that he gets to keep his job. Character change means that his fundamental attributes are changed from laziness to diligence.

The hand of the diligent will rule, but laziness ends in forced labor.

Proverbs 12:24

Can you see how trying to address the symptoms without treating the cause is a hopeless battle? Unfortunately, that's where most people are at. The internet is saturated with self-help

content designed to tweak the peripheral issues without ever getting down to the roots. Following this path is better than nothing, but at some point you have to shift your approach to begin working on the *cause*, or you'll spend the rest of your life managing *symptoms*.

We often look at our reputation as a key ingredient for success, when in reality it's only a byproduct. The secret to developing a good reputation is simply to be a good person over a long period of time. If you're not, it's only a matter of time before the illusion you've presented to the world begins to falter. Those who conspire endlessly in an attempt to carefully craft their reputation are leaning upon a facade. You can't "fake it till you make it." Not in the long term. If a lazy person tries to develop a reputation of reliability, it's only a matter of time before the inconsistencies in the charade become obvious. Anyone can put on a show for a little while, but it takes *authenticity* to stand the test of time. Many relationships and business ventures fail after a only few months, but I want your success to have longevity. If doing the right thing necessitates an audience, it's only a matter of time before the weight of your misdeeds will overwhelm your ability to conceal them.

Therefore, you must learn to never cut corners. Even when no one else is looking, God sees everything and is the perfect Judge. You won't get away with doing wrong simply because the public eye is turned away. Fruit is produced by the tree, while reputation is merely its shadow. It's tempting to find satisfaction in the approval of others, but settling for popular opinion is unwise. The shadow may offer temporary comfort for those in need of relief from environmental pressures, but it does nothing to nourish or sustain. In the same way, a good reputation can only endure if it's the product of a truly good character. The question is, do you seek the appearance of goodness or the substance of it? True integrity produces lasting fruit, while a hollow reputation fades with time.

Developing into a person of character will cause you to stand out from the crowd in the best way possible. With the way people behave these days, the bar is set low enough for you to step over with very little effort. Just showing up to work on time and doing the bare minimum is often enough to differentiate yourself in many corporate environments. In a society obsessed with the superficial, those with character stand out like a beacon, and our job is to ensure that our

lifestyle brings glory to the God we serve. That's why in Titus 2:7-8 Paul says; "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us."

Your foundation is where you start. I recommend starting at the beginning, which I why I shared a verse from Genesis, the first book in the Bible. The chapter from which I pulled this verse describes the creation of the world, and the intentions of the God who brought us into it. Any structure you build will only be as strong as its foundation. It's only logical to build upon something that has stood the test of time and proven reliable and beneficial for thousands of years. Western culture doesn't like that idea too much because it implies accountability to a higher authority. But like it or not, you need guidance. As you'll see, rejecting the ancient paths leaves you dependent upon yourself; a "self" you barely understand.

Once the foundation is laid, we can begin building. Character can be compared to the framework of a skyscraper. It is the actual skeleton that shapes and upholds everything else. Discipline is the wiring that powers and energizes, while the aesthetics are more like your personality. Mind you, that personality is formed upon the framework, and merely enhances it. A good personality will never overcome poor character.

Key point: You may *value* honesty, but your character determines whether or not you're honest when telling the truth is scary. You may *value* loyalty, but your character determines whether or not you remain faithful in the face of temptation.

- When was the last time fear held you back from telling the truth? What would it take for you to face that fear next time?
- What does your response to difficult truths reveal about the strength of your character?
- What temptations do you find hardest to resist, and how can you prepare to stand firm when they arise?
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Character Is Built, Not Born

The virtues described in Scripture are to be desired because they elevate us beyond the narrow confines of selfishness and self-interest, calling us to something far greater—the very likeness of the One who created us. In a world obsessed with self-gratification, Christian virtues like kindness, patience, and self-control teach us that fulfillment comes not from satisfying our animalistic urges, but from giving of ourselves for the benefit of others, and in so doing, learning to walk more closely with the Lover of our souls. When we embrace these virtues, we transcend the fleeting pleasures of materialism and individualism, replacing them for the deep joy and purpose that comes from living beyond ourselves. This is not just an command, but a privilege that allows us to participate in God’s work of healing and restoration in a broken world.

Additionally, these virtues are rooted in an understanding that leads to wisdom. They aren’t arbitrary rules, but rather are based on God’s perfect design for human potential. By practicing these virtues, we align ourselves with the way God intended us to live—lives of integrity, holiness, and authority. This wisdom shapes us into people of strong character who can navigate life’s complexities with grace, and refresh a dying world by acting as faithful vessels of the Living Water bubbling up inside of us. Ultimately, the Christian life is a journey toward Jesus. While there’s nothing we bring to the table bad enough to push God away, impure living can grieve the Holy Spirit, and cause us to miss out on the wondrous experience of living in true intimacy with Him. Jesus is the perfect embodiment of all virtue, and as we grow in these traits, we reflect His love, sacrifice, and holiness to a world in desperate need of hope. Choosing to cultivate Christian virtues is a choice to pursue true greatness—not as the world defines it, but as God does. Remember, this is ultimately not the result of our own efforts. No amount of hard work will ever bring about true godliness. However, surrendering our will to God’s can certainly be a challenge, and we need to be aware of the areas where we may get in the way of His great work.

Now that we have some understanding of what character is, we need to address character traits worth aspiring to. Without something to move toward, there’s no practical steps to take. We

want our values anchored early, because the inclination may be to inadvertently choose selfish traits, or to confuse worldly wisdom with real insight. While we may possess certain aspirations not found in the animal kingdom, we still contend with the downward pull of our inferior nature. Our natural inclination is toward our primal instincts, which are characterized by attitudes like; selfishness, pride, lust, fear, greed, laziness, anger, envy, and resentment. These traits lurk below the level of our awareness and exert an invisible influence over our decisions. That's not to say we only act on negative impulses, but our unconscious is quite good at masking these ignoble motivations under the guise of practicality. We might convince ourselves that our selfishness is self-care, that pride is confidence, or that our fear is common-sense. These primal instincts often masquerade as reasonable choices, allowing us to justify actions that serve our immediate desires at the expense of obedience to God. Without an awareness of this tendency, we become slaves to these instincts, mistaking indulgence for fulfillment, never understanding why our actions only ever leave us feeling empty inside. We must intentionally confront these hidden influences through contemplation and self-reflection, seeking God's guidance and strength as we endeavor to live beyond the dirt upon which we walk. The danger here, is that we will be guided by carnal instincts without knowing it.

Never make the mistake of allowing inertia to dictate the course you take. The unconscious constantly pulls you towards base desires, which are often less than noble. You need to intentionally set strong virtues as a reference point to move toward, otherwise the natural tendency will be to sink to the level of your primitive urges. This is a missing key to personal growth that seems to be lacking in our cultural discussion. We talk about how to achieve goals, but not how to know if your goals are any good to begin with. What does it benefit me if I get the things I'm after, when those desires come from a place of fear, lust, or destructive appetite? Chasing these things only causes you to pour energy into the things of the flesh rather than the things of God.

What do you think happens when you focus energy on the darkness in your heart? That's the course you choose when you allow your vision to be directed primarily by the unconscious. Underneath the surface, your brain is running genetic programs designed for survival. While

most people are able to get along fairly well, their civility and “goodness” largely stems from the desire to fulfill their own personal needs. This is not an indictment of society or a pessimistic outlook. This doesn’t mean you’ll never find genuine people or that everyone is doomed to stay trapped by their base urges. It’s simply a statement of reality that the operating system upon which we depend is fundamentally flawed. This book is not about pointing the finger at anyone but yourself. It’s also not an invitation to beat yourself up and bemoan your lot in life. I do however want you to serious thought to the origin of your motivations and desires. Do they align more closely with the ways of the world, or with the example Jesus set for us?

There’s a philosophy encouraging people to embrace something known as “the shadow-self” as a way of energizing your endeavors. The shadow-self is the sum total of your darker urges, which lie repressed under the persona you display to yourself and the world. These urges tend to simmer beneath the surface, waiting to explode when the task of keeping them contained becomes too great to contain the building pressure. Flare ups from this shadow tend to be explosive and dramatic, often seeming to be quite out of character for the perpetrator.

Integrating this shadow basically means that you use your negative emotions as a way of charging yourself up. A rejected woman may use her anger and insecurity over abandonment to fuel her workouts, in an attempt to make herself more attractive. A lonely man associates financial success with sexual value, and slaves away at his work in hopes of earning the attention of the women he desires.

As you continue to read, you’ll see how destructive this idea is. If my “shadow” is anger, then any progress I make will solidify a need for that anger. This locks in the pattern of anger in my life and it becomes a part of my identity. If I spend years chasing women to find a wife, how satisfied am I really going to be with one person? The habit of pursuing new opportunities doesn’t just disappear overnight. The constant dopamine drip associated with this seeking behavior will have established itself in by thought patterns. If your motivation for success is fear, you’ll stop running as soon as you’ve made enough progress to no longer feel threatened. This will cause you to quickly stall out and become stuck rather easily.

You can achieve your dreams, but if your motives are rotten, it's only a matter of time before they corrode you from the inside out. That's one reason you see successful people lose it all due to moral failings. They've built their foundation of carnal passions that will turn and devour them in a heartbeat. God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, often withholds blessings or authority until He has properly prepared us to handle them. He processes and refines our hearts in His holy fire, purifying our desires, and aligning our motives with His will. By burning away the impurities within us, the longing of our hearts changes from selfish ambition to godly passion.

He sees the danger of building on a weak foundation, and loves us too much to give us what we want if He knows it will destroy us. If we receive everything we desire without first being rooted in Him, those blessings can quickly become a curse, corrupting us and causing everything we've built to come crashing down in failure. The character God develops in us during these seasons of preparation is what helps us stay rooted in Him regardless of the circumstances. It ensures that when we do receive His promises, we can steward them wisely for His glory, rather than being consumed by what we thought would be our blessing.

Until the time came to fulfill his dreams, the LORD tested Joseph's character.

Psalm 105:19

While we are freed from enslavement to our lesser nature by the Blood of the Lamb and the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit within us, there are certain things we can determine to set our sights on, as more noble ambitions, in order to come into agreement with the divine course chosen for us. The carnal nature is offset and resisted by setting our minds on things above, rather than on earthly things (Colossians 3:2). Things like; generosity, humility, chastity, courage, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, and forgiveness.

Oh, but no one likes those! (Especially not chastity.)

Ok cool. I know you don't like them, but if you can't even entertain the idea of those virtues without getting uncomfortable, don't you think that points to an area of your mind which is out of your control? If you can't even bear to consider aligning yourself with such things, what

does this say about your freewill? This tension naturally must beg the question; what vice would you like to be *controlled* by? What vice would you like to be a slave to?

Motivational content in our culture likes to talk about getting rich so you can drive fast cars and date hot girls. However, with so many men addicted to pornography let me ask you this; how much control do you think you have over your decisions when the dominant thought in your head is so easy to manipulate? Do you think you're a free man when your mind is ruled by sex? Are you really capable of making clear headed decisions in this area, which has been the downfall of kings and heroes throughout the course of history?

How about the guys who teach to use anger to your advantage? Shockingly, they're always angry. Every little hiccup sends them into a rage. Instinct compels you to act through the use of emotion. It's what initiates action, but if you never learn to rise above your carnal instincts you're enslaved by them.

So you can tell yourself you want to get rich to do good in the world, but if the hidden motive is pride, sex, or fear of rejection, then everything you do will be tinted by those lesser motives. This is one reason why it's frustrating to work in corporations because the systems in place often reveal a disconnect between stated goals and actual outcomes. Leadership claims noble motives, but the processes they implement tell a different story. While they insist their intentions are for the greater good, the reality is that these structures frequently benefit the company at the expense of both clients and employees.

You need a clear set of virtuous values to move toward. The beautiful thing is that as your actions start to consistently align more closely with these virtues, they begin to reshape you on an unconscious level as well. This means you're not trapped at your current level of thinking. You can choose to rise above the level of your programming and mature into someone of integrity. Following is a list of some vices that commonly hold us captive. Pause here for a few minutes and consider how many of your decisions have been influenced by them, and how they've affected the course of your life.

Vices

Procrastination: Putting things off until the last minute. This builds a pattern of avoiding work until the fear of consequences outweighs your laziness. This leads to reduced productivity and stress, as well as a bad reputation. Your inconsistency results in missed opportunities which prevents you from making progress.

Self-Doubt: This may not seem like a vice until you realize how addicting it is to engage with self-deprecating thoughts. We constantly play out worst-case scenarios and indulge in negative outlooks. The root of this vice is *fear*. Beating ourselves down before anyone else can provides the illusion of control, but we become prisoners of our own minds. When fear dominates your life, the easiest escape is to avoid failure through indulgence in excessive doubt.

Envy: There's nothing wrong with wanting to emulate the success of others. However, there is great danger in allowing resentment to build. An envious disposition leads to a victim mentality. This creates dissatisfaction and entitlement, developing into bitterness and ingratitude. The more you begrudge those who have what you want, the less energy you have to pursue your dreams.

Greed: Perpetual dissatisfaction is a curse upon the avaricious, trapping them in their own appetites. This insatiable desire for conquest is an attempt to fill the void of an unfulfilled life. Greed is an addiction; a compulsive need to satisfy selfish desires with ever-increasing indulgence, despite detrimental effects.

Pride: The original sin. The downfall of kings, CEO's, and public figures alike. An inability to recognize one's limitations results in a grandiose self-image. Arrogance drives a wedge between a prideful person and an accurate understanding of reality. It is the invisible craftsman of self-destruction. A self-aggrandizing heart will inevitably reject wise counsel and isolate itself in an echo chamber of delusion and vanity.

Lust: The timeless temptation pulling our strings as an ever-present architect of moral decay. This vice consumes the mind with insatiable desire that hopelessly distorts priorities and values. The recklessness of this passion ensnares the undisciplined heart in a cycle of short-lived gratification and self-destruction.

Anger: The combustible nature of a volatile soul imprisons its victims in a relentless cycle of destructive outbursts and resentment. Marked by a pattern of explosiveness, this devouring impulse consumes those in its path and leaves the perpetrator isolated and bitter.

Sloth: Wasted potential, unaccountability, and passivity, are the fruits of this silent killer. Stealing your future one wasted moment at a time, this moral failing drags the apathetic into the mire of inertia and lethargy to quietly suffocate their potential. Like still waters that grow stagnant, the languid suffer the decay of character as laziness dulls their resolve.

Fear: A breeding-ground for inaction, this paralyzing force turns opportunities into the chains of regret. It binds the spirit with the fetters of dismay, and births hesitation and insecurity. Fear imprisons the weak-minded in a cage of doubt, concealing its inhibiting presence by numbing the heart.

Resentment: Unforgiveness erodes our soul like a smoldering ember. Warping our ability to process emotions, this vice blinds its victims to the bitter effects of its turmoil. If allowed to fester unchecked, it will sap your joy and render even the most promising situations rancorous.

Addiction: Unrelenting cravings that ravage the body, soul, and spirit with the rod of despair and depletion. Those bound by the chains of dependency find themselves enslaved to the unyielding need to temporally quench their pain with destructive habits that only exacerbate their condition. Not limited to substance abuse, this cycle preys upon the undiscerning.

Dishonesty: This isolating habit rips apart the fabric of society by corroding trust and subverting integrity. Rather than living authentically, a treacherous person presents a facade to the world. This mask creates a barrier between the individual and those who might otherwise make for meaningful connections. Attempting to distort reality by relying on falsehood, the habitual liar is ensnared by his/her own fictitious delusions.

These are the forces that rule the lives of most people. Because they lurk in the shadows of our unconscious, we often don't even recognize the influence such impulses exert over us. Moreover, some of them are things you probably don't even *want* to let go of. So I'll ask again, which of those vices would you like to surrender your free-will to? That's exactly what happens when you fail to intentionally overcome them. Such vices are our natural tendency, and without conscious effort, we won't move away from them.

Your brain runs largely off of unconscious programming. If the majority of that programming is based around personal indulgence, and enabled by weakness of character, you'll be caught in the gravitational pull of your deepest depravity. Basing your life around the gratification and tolerance of vice is a surefire way to never rise to your full potential. Attempting to "integrate the shadow-self" causes you to remain a slave to your animal nature, unable to shake the dark impulses that haunt the perverse. On the other hand; the person who intends to live a respectable life, a life of freedom, will want to begin placing a focus on instilling the following virtues into their unconscious programming.

Virtues

Diligence: The unwavering commitment to purpose that fuels sustained effort and perseverance. This virtue embodies the spirit of relentless pursuit and meticulous attention to detail, transforming ambition into achievement. Diligence is the driving force behind progress, pushing individuals to consistently strive toward their goals despite challenges or setbacks. It cultivates a resilient work ethic and fosters a sense of responsibility, ensuring that every task is approached

with dedication and thoroughness. In its essence, diligence is the embodiment of steadfast effort that turns dreams into reality through persistent and focused action.

Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.

Proverbs 10:4

Courage: Courage is the strength to stand firm in the face of fear, knowing that our strength comes not from ourselves, but from the Lord. Courage is rooted in trust—it is the decision to cling God’s promises no matter how tempted we are to doubt. His Word is true and His power is best demonstrated in our weakness. This knowledge incites us to move forward in the face of opposition, rooted in the assurance that God goes before us, and that nothing can separate us from His love. This strengthens us to follow Him closely, because we know the Lord is our refuge, our victory, and our reward.

Contentment: Demonstrated by gratitude, contentment is the peace that comes from knowing we are held by a Savior who provides for all our needs, even when we find ourselves desiring lesser things. Setting our minds on Christ allows us to endure trying times with grace and peace. It enables us to accept our circumstances without anxiety, empowered to change them if called, and to endure them with grace and patience as we shift our focus from the world to the Word. Unlike complacency, which leads to stagnation, Christ-centered contentment frees us from the relentless pursuit of “more” and draws us into a deeper trust in His provision. By finding joy and purpose in Him, we’re able to thrive regardless of any external factors—not through tolerance, which is passivity, but by a faith that trusts fully in His sufficiency and love. The practice of godly contentment prepares us to handle an increase of blessing without making idols of that which God gives us.

Generosity: A generous person exhibits a consistent desire to uplift others without expecting anything in return. This may start as a discipline, but will quickly become a joyful expression of God’s love flowing through you. This habit of giving selflessly is the natural result of a

compassionate heart and a grateful spirit. Antithetical to greed, generosity both flows from, and reinforces an abundance mindset. It inspires kindness and connection within a community, and tends to ripple out beyond what we can immediately perceive. Plain and simple, generosity is the practice of sharing with the intention of enriching the lives of others.

Evidence of God's character replacing yours; true generosity is a reflection of His boundless love and provision for us. A generous person gives freely and joyfully, not out of obligation or desire for recognition, but as a grateful response to God's own unending kindness. Begin this practicing this discipline now. Generosity breaks the chains of greed, and gives God an opportunity to prove to you that His provision is never scarce. Generosity is a holy act of imitating Jesus by placing others before yourself.

Giving a gift can open doors; it gives access to important people!

Proverbs 18:16

Humility: Jesus said "Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). When we lower ourselves, God lifts us up, refining our character to become more like Christ. Commonly confused with self-deprecation, this virtue offers relief from the follies of pride, and benefits us with an awareness of our complete dependence upon His strength and grace. It softens our heart towards others despite their faults, resulting in a desire for unity and restoration, rather than division and bitterness. Humility keeps us from making brash mistakes, and positions us rightly before God that we may walk more closely with Him.

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

James 4:6

Chastity: The disciplined commitment to purity in thought and action, guiding carnal desires by integrity rather than impulse. By ruling over physical urges rather than letting them rule over you, this virtue cultivates self-control and prevents a great deal of life-altering mistakes. Passion

is a lens which distorts, while prudence develops authentic relationships and fortifies character. An intentional life leads to sound decision-making, fostering clarity and ensuring choices are guided by long-term well-being rather than short-term gratification. Chastity honors the body as a place meant for His Spirit to dwell and rest. Practicing chastity teaches us to see others as He does—not merely as objects of desire but as His children. This virtue draws us closer to God’s heart, teaching us to subject our will toward His purposes rather than being dominated by the carnal passions.

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. Psalm 119:9

Patience: One of the fruits of the Spirit, patience isn’t about waiting so much as about *how* you wait. It’s the steadfast endurance of time and circumstance while maintaining faith, and resolve. Practice develops the ability to remain cool and composed despite delays or frustration. Practicing this quality tempers your impulsive tendencies and cultivates a calm demeanor, allowing you to endure the process with grace and dignity. God’s timing is perfect, and we must learn to trust Him through every moment of waiting, disappointment, and challenge. By surrendering control we learn to rest in His peace during the storm, rather than begin attached to the need for life to work out a certain way.

Zeal: As Jesus drove out money-changers from the temple, so does a godly zeal inspire us to pursue holiness and cast out all that would endanger intimacy with God. In a world overwhelmingly populated by the apathetic and halfhearted, a bit of fire in your eyes sets you apart in the best way. Often confused with hype, this resolve to maintain enthusiasm and focus

keeps you locked onto your mission like a laser for sustained durations of time. When rooted in virtuous intentions, zeal is a powerful force for change. It infuses your efforts with vigor and determination, propelling you forward and inspiring those around you. Building your life around purpose generates energy that can transform even the most humble of beginnings into stories of triumph. This fire is a gift from our creator Himself, as the Scriptures say that the Lord is *passionately committed* to our salvation (Isaiah 9:7). Since we are made in His image, we can expect that the closer we draw to His design for our lives, the more He will stir our hearts.

When prophesying of the crucifixion, King David wrote “all who seek the LORD will praise him” (Psalm 22:26). When we encounter the Lord and begin to learn how wonderful He is, the natural response is always praise and admiration. True worship doesn’t come from going through the religious motions, but rather from seeking Him, and refusing to give up until He reveals Himself to us. The greatest demonstration of love happened on the cross. When we contemplate this work, a door is opened that invites the presence of God into our hearts. Rather than attempting to motivate ourselves, we take our eyes off of *us*, and turn them to Jesus. This emptying of *self* provides space for God to fill us with His heart. Thus, true zeal is not human enthusiasm, but divine providence.

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

Romans 12:11

Courage: The resolve to stand composed in the face of adversity and uncertainty.

This virtue isn't about the absence of fear, but about how you handle it. Confronting challenges head-on frees you from the illusion of helplessness that holds the fainthearted in an iron grip. Courage enables us to turn opposition into opportunity, uncertainty into excitement, and trepidation into triumph. Without it you are bound by the chains of fear and live as an easily manipulated prisoner of circumstance.

The moral failings of the Western world stem largely from cowardliness. Afraid to stand for good in a culture that loves evil, society has degenerated into a cesspool of depravity and chaos. We aren’t brave enough to take a stand against injustice for fear our own transgressions

will be examined. We preach tolerance lest we be held accountable for our own compromises. It is the spineless who have allowed perversion and corruption to run rampant in our cities, and it will take courage to reclaim our sanity. That courage begins with the willingness to face the darkness in your own heart first; to contend with the weakness of your soul, and to purge any trace of dishonor. We need the courage to pick up our cross and follow Jesus through the terrors of this life, a strength that only comes from God's grace.

But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.

Revelation 21:8 (Emphasis added)

Forgiveness: The act of releasing those who have wronged us from our judgment, whether they deserve it or not. This virtue produces peace, freedom, and unity. It breaks the chains of bitterness that poisons the heart and darkens the soul. Forgiveness is not an acceptance of wrong behavior, but rather a choice to deny the corrosive effects of resentment to take root in your heart. This path opens the door to healing, growth, intimacy, and godliness. It initiates deeper connections in our relationships and frees us from a heavy burden. The easily offended and perpetually victimized inhabit a jail-cell of their own crafting; but forgiveness transforms pain into compassion, transgression into breakthrough, and trauma into empathy.

Forgiveness mirrors the heart of God, whose mercies are fresh every morning. By choosing to forgive, we imitate Christ and experience liberation from the shackles of anger and bitterness. This is an offering to God, demonstrating that we prefer His ways over ours. It is an exercise in godliness, teaching us about the Lord's nature in a way that can only be learned through experience.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Matthew 5:7

Temperance: The discipline to practice moderation and restraint when tempted with indulgence. This prudence keeps us off the path of excessive self-gratification, which quickly leads to destruction. It enables us to appreciate the pleasurable things in life without being consumed by them. Temperance doesn't imply a lack of enjoyment, but rather freedom from the gluttony of our primal instincts. Practicing temperance builds inner fortitude, which spills over into all aspects of life. Moderation in desire lends itself to moderation in temper, and stability of character. You must choose whether you serve, or have dominion over your carnal desires. A prudent person is able to make thoughtful decisions, and discretion helps ensure our actions are well-measured. Practicing moderation invites the Holy Spirit to guide us in all our choices. This lifestyle shields us from the emptiness of the blasé, and facilitates a deeper connection with God.

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

1 Peter 5:8

Integrity: Just as steel is purged of impurities before use in construction, so too must our words, actions, and values be made free of inconsistencies, lest they crumble under the pressures of life. This virtue is the glue that maintains conscientiousness throughout all areas of life. If you can't trust yourself to do what you say, you won't feel confident in attempting anything worth doing. If your actions don't align with virtue, then you need to reassess your commitment to God's principles, and question whether you're relying on His power or your own strength.

Integrity requires adherence to the commands of God, who sees everything done in secret. This unwavering commitment to doing what is right, regardless of the cost, provides an antidote to the infection of compromise. Living with integrity helps us serve as a testimony of God's faithfulness to a broken world. Our steadfastness in doing good demonstrates the mysterious transformative power of the Holy Spirit working within us.

The day is coming when God, through Christ Jesus, will judge everyone's secret life.

Romans 2:16

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Philippians 4:8

Virtue: The Foundation of Impact

Strong character is a key that unlocks transformation in every aspect of your life. It strengthens your relationships, career, and overall life satisfaction. What you'll find in this book goes deeper than simply being on your best behavior. We'll explore the foundations of who you are and how you relate to the world. Investing in character development is one of the most important things you can do with your time and energy. Doing so cultivates qualities that inspire trust, respect, and intimacy with yourself and others. This doesn't just make you slightly better, but completely changes the roles and opportunities you're capable of shouldering. While we can never earn God's approval, He certainly entrusts the obedient with greater opportunities for service. As the Scriptures say; "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" (Luke 16:10).

Character development affects your relationships, mental health, financial capacity, and overall life-experience. Most people are so fixated on results that they fail to fully engage with the process of formation that makes those results possible in the first place. They take shortcuts and in doing so fail to initiate internal change. They push and pull the levers of the machine, but are unable to sustain the effort as their bodies are worn down. I've seen this happen with many military leaders who attempted to bully their team into obedience. While that may work for a brief moment, stress and danger increase the level of control needed to maintain order. These commanders quickly discover the limitations of their authority when external threats overshadow any intimidation produced by rank alone.

Prioritizing character growth will inevitably lead to opportunities in any arena in which you pursue excellence. Employers, peers and clients are all drawn to those who can be trusted to stay cool under pressure, and to do the right thing whether or not anyone is looking. Integrity builds a reputation that precedes you, creating a personal brand of trust and respect. This trust becomes a pillar of lasting relationships within your community and business, distinguishing you as a leader worth following and a companion worth investing in.

But why spend all this energy on character development when there's a new trend to jump on? Why become more honest when it seems like those who lie, cheat, and steal are the ones who get ahead? Why worry about consulting God about every move you make when you have so many good ideas? These are some of the questions we will be answering shortly. Next, let's take a brief look at how strength of character impacts your life from a few different perspectives.

Make Your Mind Work for You

Many fail to recognize how easily influenced a weak character can be. We are quite easily misled and the methods for doing so are both effective and reliable. Companies and individuals are paid insane sums of money to conduct market research and develop brand awareness for a reason. You don't have to look far to see how easily the crowds are swept into a frenzy, and it's foolish to consider yourself elevated above the mob by any superiority of your own.

Understanding this vulnerability is crucial because it highlights the importance of fortifying ourselves against external influences. By building upon a strong, principled foundation, we can resist the pull of mass-hysteria and consumer marketing. This vigilance not only buffers us against worldly confusion, but also empowers us to lead others with clarity and insight in a society ruled by primal passions and cognitive bias.

Looking at character development through the practical lens of psychological functions is vital for understanding why we do what we do. Without understanding these mental dynamics it's difficult to accurately address our destructive patterns. By examining how cognitive biases, emotional states, and primal urges shape our behaviors, we begin to pull back the veil to expose the invisible forces pulling our strings, and discover new areas of weakness for which we can petition God for radical transformation.

Cognitive shortcuts, such as the confirmation bias and availability heuristics, often undermine our intentions by distorting our perception and reinforcing flawed thinking patterns. For example; the confirmation bias is a tendency that causes us to search for, interpret, and remember information in a way that confirms our preexisting beliefs. We're more likely to notice and highlight information that agrees with our current understanding of the world, while ignoring or distorting contradicting evidence. This can lead to the creation of "echo-chambers" which are easily observable during political campaigns, and the cesspool of social media comment sections.

Likewise, the "availability heuristic" is essentially a mental shortcut that causes us to ascribe value to information based on how easily it comes to mind. The problem here is that

information is often at the forefront of our mind because it's recent, vivid, or emotionally charged. This means that a marketer can influence your perception of a product simply by making it familiar to you, regardless of quality. Terrifying ideas seem likely because they're more easily imagined, and traumatic experiences *feel* likely to repeat themselves. For example, major decisions can be affected by something as subtle as the lyrics to an emotional song you've recently listened to, or an oft-repeated social media post.

These biases come with a set of pros and cons. On the one hand, they serve an important function by expediting our unconscious thought process and saving us an unimaginable amount of mental resources. The downside is that since these processes happen beneath the level of conscious awareness, there is always a danger that our decisions are influenced by undesirable factors.

These biases can cause us to justify poor decisions, overlook our faults, and cling to comforting but inaccurate beliefs and ideologies. Recognizing how these mental shortcuts make us see what we want to see is the first step towards making better choices. The more you learn about your brain, the less you trust your judgment. This awareness can be unsettling, but there is wisdom in acknowledging that our understanding is inherently limited. We are totally dependent on God, and we must either turn our eyes to Him or succumb to the blindness of our minds and the pressures of the world. His Word speaks light in the darkness, revealing the futility of our human understanding in comparison to His divine knowledge. Therefore, we lean on Him. To live by faith means that our walk is guided by the Living Truth, who makes a straight path through the chaos and uncertainties assailing us at every moment.

While we'll never fully overcome these biases (and there are many more), we can mitigate some of their negative effects. Doing so empowers us to transform our intentions into actions, and our dreams into tangible reality. It is an extremely dangerous mistake to buy into the lie that we are free agents making autonomous decisions, unfettered by primal instincts and faulty psychological programming. Much of our behavior is driven by basic, often uncivilized impulses such as the vices we've already discussed. These impure motives automatically corrupt our character, and unfortunately, are often celebrated by the depraved societies we inhabit.

These primal instincts and desires will always lead us in the direction of their own agendas. Think of a toddler throwing a massive temper-tantrum. In that moment, the child is consumed by rage. That anger only cares about achieving its own ends, regardless of any negative consequences to the rest of the being. It's only after years of maturity and guidance that we learn to subject such impulses into the greater whole of our being. This enables us to experience negative emotions without being consumed by them. Sadly, many people are developmentally challenged in regards to emotional regulation. They've graduated beyond the level of "toddler," but are still easily overwhelmed by their internal experiences, and act childishly under the stress.

Our impulses can easily steer us toward destructive patterns due to their intrinsic obsession with instant gratification. Recognizing that our baseline inclinations are oriented downwards is crucial when determining how much weight our internal state should dictate our actions. The goal is to actively counteract these instincts by pursuing virtue through the power of the Holy Spirit. Practically speaking, our minds must be renewed by the Lord, who uses time spent in His word and in prayer to reprogram our thinking into a closer approximation of His own. The more we allow His teaching to sink into our hearts, the freer we become. By aiming upward towards virtues such as those listed previously, our behavioral paradigms are gradually restructured and rewired to resonate with divine desires. This not only mitigates the influence of our carnal nature, but also nurtures a more buoyant and resilient character, which leads to increased productivity and quality of life.

To sum up, I hope this chapter impresses upon you how desperately we need to prefer the ways of God over our own; for "the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9)

Actions Reflect the Heart

While we want to go deeper than simply adjusting our behavior, we also cannot ignore the significance of our conduct. When people struggle to change a behavior, it's typically because they don't understand the mechanics behind it. Actions are merely the fruits of an underlying system. The lights in your house won't work properly if the wiring system is installed incorrectly, and that wiring is dependent upon the structure provided by the frame of your house. Likewise, your character supplies the support for your behavioral patterns to develop. The decisions you make in response to various experiences is founded upon your core values and beliefs, and facilitated by strength of character to influence your actions despite opposing desires. Without addressing the foundation, attempts to modify behavior will often be ineffective. True change must run at least as deep as the most fundamental issues.

While behavior itself isn't the root of the problem, our actions are often the most accessible doorway to our unconscious. What I mean is that there is a dynamic, mirrored relationship between the internal and external. You change your actions by changing who you are, but the most practical method for changing who you are is often by changing your actions.

Confused? Stay with me for a minute.

Habits eventually solidify into character traits. I stress that behavior is symptomatic because I don't want you to stop at developing better habits. It is a great start though, and I encourage you to do it. It's also probably the most practical step to take, as we'll see in a later chapter. However, we all know people who seem to get on the right track, only to seem to stay trapped by their former identity. No matter what they do, it keeps pulling them back, acting as a gravitational force that drags them into a prison of their own design. This demonstrates how behavior serves as merely the starting point and not the end goal. You can correct a few destructive habits without addressing the deeper issues causing them in the first place, but this is treating the symptoms while allowing the actual sickness to fester.

This behavioral angle demonstrates how our actions and habits serve as the building blocks of our character, revealing that its overall value is greater than the sum of its parts. By

understanding the underlying factors driving our behaviors and making informed, intentional choices, we are equipped to create positive, lasting change. This insight empowers us to break free from destructive patterns and align our actions with our values; the definition of integrity of character. Through deliberate practice and self-awareness, we transform our values into habits and virtue into character, paving the way for personal growth and consistent fulfillment.

To this end, let's take a quick look at some of the basic ways our behavior is influenced. Possessing a better understanding of how our brains were created can help us approach life more efficiently, as well as demonstrate just how hopeless our situation is without God's help. As you read through the following sections, I hope you will become more deeply aware of how easily influenced you are. We are dependent upon the functions of a brain that is part of a material body, existing within a fallen world. As such, we are subject to certain psychological and biological weaknesses that negatively effect our perception and decision making abilities. What follows is an introduction to these functions, with the intention of highlighting your total dependency upon the One whose perception and judgements are perfect.

Classical Conditioning

Classical conditioning creates a link between our natural, intuitive responses, and specific events, through repeated associations. The gold-standard of this experiment is the work of Ivan Pavlov, who discovered this principle by training dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell. While the bell itself had no bearing on the dogs digestive process, the animals learned to associate the sound with food, thus prompting a natural response.

It's interesting to realize that a neutral, or even a negative experience, can become associated with a positive outcome through repetition. This concept is termed "illusory correlation," and is a principle that essentially causes people to form associations between random events, mistakenly believing that these elements contributed to a certain outcome. In other words, we imagine connections between unrelated events, and believe we can bring about certain outcomes through actions that produce no such consequences.

This cognitive bias can cause all sorts of havoc in our behaviors and decision-making processes, and it happens more frequently than you can imagine. We “learn” how to influence outcomes as children, and those beliefs become so deeply ingrained that they are rarely questioned, even when repeatedly proven to be ineffective. This is how people develop superstitious habits like wearing a lucky shirt, or performing obsessive morning routines before giving a presentation. It also causes us to “learn” certain behaviors that are antithetical to how God has commanded us to live. What’s more, those behaviors are deeply ingrained and act as blindspots which tend to go unnoticed.

It’s crucial to examine the beliefs and habits you hold regarding what it takes to make it in this world. Many of the “strategies” you rely on, are likely superficial quirks with little real impact. The internet is filled with these misguided associations, where interesting habits are marketed as secret shortcuts to success. However, pursuing quick fixes over authentic growth always leads to disappointment when we realize that these trends (cold showers) fail to bring about the transformation we seek in our lives, whether in finances, relationships, or anything else. Instead of chasing after these empty promises, instead commit your ways to the Lord, who alone has the power to change your heart and release prosperity. It’s vital that we recognize the hopelessness of our twisted minds and decide to lean on God’s instructions, rather than our own understanding.

Start evaluating the methods you use in any given area of life. Ask yourself if there is a genuine relationship between the input of that activity and the desired result, or if you’re merely seeing a pattern where none exists. This mental auditing helps you focus on the factors with true leverage, rather than wasting energy on superstitions and irrelevant habits. For example; perhaps you’ve been struggling with a particular habit or weakness for a long time. Humans are stubborn creatures, and we often persist in doing things our own way, even when it’s clearly not working. Ask yourself if the approach you’ve been using has produced the results you’re after. You’ll likely find that you’ve spent years telling yourself you’ll change, only to realize that you’re not much further along than when your journey first began. Rather than continue in the same rut, begin to give this problem to the Lord. Stop trying to do things your own way, and instead ask

God for direction. You can cast all your care upon Him, for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). Admit that you've tried things your way long enough, and ask for understanding of His will in this situation. Request that your eyes be opened to the futility of human methods, and petition for freedom from your habitual shortcomings.

While you may have prayed about this issue before, it's possible you haven't fully opened the door for God to work as He desires. Often, the first step is acknowledging our stubborn attachment to ineffective routines and inviting God to take over, allowing for the real transformation we seek. As you get better at recognizing patterns, it becomes easier to replace harmful or unproductive habits with ones that reflect His guidance. Understanding these psychological principles sheds light on the unconscious reasoning behind many of our actions and helps us see just how irrational some of our behaviors can be. By exposing these blind spots, you gain the insight needed to bring them before God, trusting Him to renew your mind and redirect your path.

Operant conditioning

While classical conditioning relies on what happens before an event, operant conditioning takes place when a behavior is associated with a consequence. A reward offered after a desirable behavior is performed, connects the action and payout in the mind of the subject. In practical terms, this means that by consciously rewarding yourself for positive behaviors—such as sticking to a workout routine or completing a project on time—you reinforce those actions and make them more likely to become ingrained as habits.

A basic understanding of this concept can expedite your personal growth by providing the tools for intentionally shaping your behaviors and habits. By recognizing that your actions are influenced by the consequences, you can strategically use positive reinforcement to encourage virtues and punish vice.

For instance, when you first begin a workout routine, you'll likely see the gym as a source of pain and discomfort. Once you've begun seeing results, however, your view of the weight room starts to shift. You notice the changes in your body, and gradually begin to associate

the joy and excitement of building your dream physique with the temporary suffering and fatigue. Once this idea has sunk in, each repetition begins to feel different. Instead of thinking about the workout as a case of isolated misery, the long-term benefits are tied in so closely that even the present pain feels good.

Those initial phases of struggling without reward can make your resolutions feel pointless and out of reach, causing most people give up on their mission too early. Anything worth doing is difficult, and as a beginner you won't have the proof of concept to encourage you to push through. This happens with gym routines, new sales reps, entrepreneurs, aspiring artists, and pretty much everyone who's ever tried to do anything. Just remember, the first few months will be marked by discomfort, but if you can stick with it long enough to see results, your brain will begin to rewire itself. The discomfort will have meaning, making it bearable. The suffering will be vitalized with a sense of purpose, driving you forward despite your reluctance.

In the same way, consider how much greater the stakes are when it comes to your walk with God. Just as you commit to your physical health or professional goals with intensity and persistence, your pursuit of godliness deserves even more focus and energy. Discipleship requires effort, patience, and a willingness to endure seasons of discomfort and suffering, but it also comes with an eternal promise from the Lover of our souls. Every stage of this journey will be difficult, don't let anyone tell you different. It also may take some time before you really notice any progress. Yet, as with any meaningful goal, perseverance reaps rewards. The deeper you press into your relationship with God, the more you will see Him respond with the love, patience, joy, and peace that can only come from Him. Every step along this path should be savored as it brings you that much closer to Jesus. Commit to the daily pursuit of holiness with the same energy you devote to your earthly goals and watch what God does with your obedience. Remember that your earthly accomplishments will quickly fade into oblivion, but the fruits of a life lived for God endure forever.

This train of thought also leads us to another important point. We're often kept from sticking with good habits because the early stages lack the payoff our brain is seeking, but there's

another hidden danger here. To understand this we need to consider how operant conditioning interacts with the law of cause and effect, a concept that seems to be lost on many people.

Like it or not, there is a consequence for everything we do (gasp). Those consequences may be obscured for all sorts of reasons, but the reality is that nothing we do happens in a vacuum. If we go to the gym and lift weights, our body responds in a predictable way. If we eat more calories than we burn, well, that excess shows up on the scale whether we agree with it or not.

Most people who grew up on a farm know that it's rare to experiment with grabbing an electric fence more than once. Before you even have time to process the texture of the fence, searing bolts of pain dart up your arm. The shock is typically meant to discourage full grown bulls and horses from putting pressure on the structure, and that voltage directed into the hand of a 12 year old is something not easily forgotten. While there's always that special exception, few people need further encouragement to keep a healthy distance between themselves and the fence.

You see, it's easy to learn quickly when there's immediate feedback. The problem arises when there's a significant delay between the cause and its effect. It may take a few months for someone new to sales to build a pipeline and start seeing the money rolling in. It may take a just as long for an overweight person to see any noticeable change in their body after beginning an exercise regimen. How much more so might it take the consequences of lying, cheating, stealing and manipulating to catch up with us?

Since behavior is heavily influenced by outcome, either positive or negative, it's common for us to persist in negative behaviors simply because the short-term gains seem to outweigh any negative consequences. However, we need to learn to keep perspective. It might appear that we've gotten away with one lie, just as one extra serving of dessert doesn't immediately appear on our waistline. But what happens when we keep indulging our appetites?

Lying seems like an easy solution to getting what we want while avoiding conflict. But once we start, where does it end? Just as someone who indulges their appetite doesn't notice the gradual change in body structure, the immoral person is rarely aware of the compounding effect of their sinful actions. Since we see ourselves in the mirror frequently, the day-by-day changes in

weight are so subtle that our perception shifts to match the change. It's often not until we see older pictures of ourselves that we suddenly become extremely aware of the effects of our habits.

This same idea applies to character development. It's likely that your flaws once seemed like the best option available the time. But now it's been decades and what started as mild laziness has grown into perpetual procrastination and unreliability. Understand that each action we perform has a consequence, and be especially cautious to not sacrifice the integrity of your character in exchange for short-term gains. Constantly remind yourself that the lie, the angry outburst, the inconsistency, is a vote counted towards whether your character flourishes or degrades.

On the other hand, don't be shy to rejoice in your progress when you choose obedience to God over servitude to the flesh. Slow down and thank the Lord for every time He gives you the strength to hold your tongue, or to avoid the snares of dishonesty. Recognize that every small step of repentance is evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit working within you. These seemingly unremarkable moments are actually proof of your salvation. This isn't to say that you earn your way into heaven of course, but the changes in your desires and behaviors demonstrate the power of the cross at work in your heart. This is cause for celebration! Don't let these moments pass you by. They are opportunities to appreciate God's work, to thank Him, and to reinforce these behaviors in your psyche. The disciplined habit of gratitude towards God is more valuable than any amount of earthly wealth.

By understanding and leveraging the principles of psychological conditioning, we no longer have to fumble in the dark, wondering why even our best intentions never seem to materialize into tangible results. By utilizing our natural hardwiring instead of working against it, we can also begin to harness the natural power of the unconscious mind, and begin to nudge it towards a life of freedom. Make no mistake: as long as you remain at the mercy of hidden cognitive biases, you will be a slave to your base desires, and doomed to live like an animal. But by seeking God's guidance and allowing His Word to penetrate into the depths of our hearts, we can address the root of our struggles rather than merely treating the symptoms. It's through His transformative power that we cultivate habits rooted in wisdom, which will endure the demands

of time. This is neither a popular position nor an easy route to take, but we can't expect God's *product* while rejecting His *process*.

Why Live According to Divine Principles?

I first became fixated on character development while reading about some of the differences between the culture of today, and the Victorian era. Something that jumped out at me was the contrast in how romantic prospects were described. Words like; “virtuous, generous, honorable, and courageous” were used. It occurred to me that I’d never heard a modern woman describe her ideal man with such language. The more I thought about it, I realized I’ve never prioritized these things myself. While I obviously know that integrity is important, most of what I’d been looking for up to that point was dependent upon how much of a connection I felt with someone. Are we attracted to each other? Do we vibe? Are we having fun?

This realization happened to come during a time when I was becoming intensely aware of some of my destructive patterns, and was also quite frustrated watching my friends make the same mistakes over and over again. We were clearly ignoring the red flags starting us right in the face. This helped me realize there had been a significant cultural shift from valuing character, to valuing personality. The result was that we’d hitched our wagons to some rather questionable individuals. We’d found ourselves dating some fun and entertaining people who didn’t seem to care whether or not they shattered our lives. The allure of a charismatic personality can distract from hidden danger, and we often overlook the importance of character in favor of instant gratification. As a result, many in my generation have had our hearts repeatedly broken, and have lost hope for our futures.

This change in focus became even more apparent when I noticed that the concept of character development seemed to have fallen by the wayside in education and media. People are rarely interested in the hard, introspective work required to build a strong and virtuous character. Movies portray individuals with special powers rather than years dedicated to the voluntary shedding of blood, sweat, and tears. The emphasis shifted from *enduring*, to magical traits and quick fixes. Personal growth, once a cornerstone of meaningful relationships and development, is now overshadowed by a culture obsessed with superficial appeal, selfish desires, and virtue

signaling. Many are grappling with the consequences of their corruption without understanding the source from which they flow.

I grew up reading adventure novels as much as I could. I was homeschooled and had a tremendous amount of time on my hands. Keep in mind, this was before the internet existed in its current form. As I got older, my taste in movies developed along the adventurous path as well. I love the idea of a nobody who developed into the hero of an incredible story. In these narratives, the protagonist always struggled to find their place in the world. The adventures were not just physical but also deeply personal, involving a transformation that turned them from the outcast into conquerors. These stories irreparably shaped my imagination and influenced my view of the world. No matter how desperate things have gotten for me, I've always fallen back on the fundamental idea that *adversity forges heroes*.

I resonated deeply with the idea of the rejected. The ones who, despite not fitting in, attracted a crew of misfits who were united by a common goal. In fact, rejection is often the first major hurdle a hero must overcome. It gave me hope to realize that the pursuit of meaning could act as a crucible for human relationships. This archetypal progression from obscurity to prominence inspired a fervent dedication to every interest I felt might lead me along similar paths. Reading took me beyond the mere thrill of adventure, and ingrained powerful themes of meaningful accomplishment through dedication to a worthwhile goal. It taught me the transformative nature of adversity and profoundly shaped how I perceive and approach the world.

One of the most powerful examples of this journey is found in the life of King David. Before being trusted to rule Israel, God first took David on an arduous journey that would push him far beyond his limits. While David is rightly remembered as a great warrior of God, the season of life that preceded his reign would be marked by challenges of humility, integrity, and faithfulness. It was not enough for David to be courageous on the battlefield. To rule with wisdom and justice required a heart that would remain softened towards the Lord. Without this intimacy, the noise of the world quickly drowns out God's voice. He often whispers to us

while the world shouts. While this can be frustrating at times, it is ultimately for our own good. Many people complain that they can't hear God's voice, especially when life's storms become intense. But if you're struggling to hear someone, the solution is simple; lean in, and get closer.

It was during those formative years that God taught David to lock in on His Heart above all else. When Saul offered him the weapons of the world, David refused on account of his relationship with the Lord. He had learned to trust God against the lion and the bear, and recognized that the battle hadn't changed. You likewise, will be obliged to face the lion and the bear before being entrusted to face the giant. In other words, you will need to learn to conquer your *animal nature*, with the *weapons* of Heaven. Rather than struggling against your primitive urges with sheer willpower, you must learn engage in warfare utilizing the full armor of God. For example, when faced with temptation, the correct response is not to grit your teeth and try your best to hold out against the attack. Rather, those moment require you to pick of the sword of the Spirit and to strike back at the devil with an attack that will actually wound him. If Jesus relied strictly on a Scriptural response when faced with temptation, so should you.

Just like God trained David to fight in seclusion, so will the majority of your most pivotal moments be forged in secret. What you do when no one else is around really matters to God. David's path was one of patience and obedience, and he was often led into situations that resulted in disappointment and pain. Despite these frustrations however, his love for God kept his heart from becoming overwhelmed by the pressures of formation. This process would prepare him for the tremendous weight of responsibility that would soon come, leaving his name written in prominence upon the pages of history. But even more importantly than that, his days would be marked by deep friendship with God. Only once he had proven his character in secrecy would he be trusted with that authority. David's story reveals that God shapes us in private before He positions us in public, tempering our virtue and refining our purity

Despite his flaws, David is a hero worth looking up to, and his adventurous spirit is one worth emulating. On the other hand, what themes does the media bombard us with these days? What do they program into us? Most movies fixate on celebrating sexuality and diversity for its own sake; more so than the intrinsic capacity of humans to overcome the incalculable dangers

constantly threatening our existence. Movies and shows focus on highlighting surface-level attributes such as physical appearance, cultural identity, or romantic entanglements. The main characters are unapologetically flawed; often exhibiting rather extreme signs of narcissism and psychopathy in the name of “comedy.”

This shift in accepted character traits is caused by the compounding effect of mass obsession with superficiality and personal appeasement. It’s become a self-perpetuating system that amplifies our desire for immediate satisfaction and validation. As the increased promotion of licentious and egocentric narratives eclipses the moral compass illustrated by the archetypal heroic quest, our capacity to maintain integrity and strive towards higher ideals is severely eroded. This programming can diminish our appreciation for internal strength, and leads us to confuse personal fulfillment with the fleeting satisfaction of external recognition.

As modern media increasingly prioritizes self-gratification and transient pleasures, it’s crucial to earnestly search for the hidden wealth of integrity. By recognizing the erosion of our ideals and making a diligent effort to live an upright life, we not only preserve our moral compass but also discover a deeper sense of purpose. This commitment to godly character and virtue empowers us to navigate the coming challenges with resilience and confidence. It is only by holding fast to God’s precepts that we are empowered to effect change, and to stand firm against the depravity that threatens to define our time.

Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.

Proverbs 3:13-15

Build a Legacy

The world constantly pulls us in a thousand directions, promising fame, riches, and love, in exchange for our values and servitude. In such a corrupt and selfish time as this, the cultivation of strong character has never been more critical. Failing to pursue virtue, we risk being swept away by the forces of nature that constantly bear down upon us in the form of societal pressure, programming, desires, and cognitive biases. Lacking the integrity to hold fast against this oppression, we run the risk of losing ourselves beneath the avalanche of corruption and degradation. The only hope we have is that God will establish an unshakeable foundation within our hearts that will stand the test of time. Unfortunately, we often leave our personal and spiritual development to the mercy of circumstance and fortune, rather than a passionate commitment to the Word.

Your character will develop whether you work on it or not. The danger lies in allowing this growth to occur without awareness or intention, as the influences shaping it are likely not beneficial. Your soul ever contends with the downward pull of carnality, inclining itself towards primitive behavior. Without deliberate resistance, these base impulses tend to dominate. This leads to a character shaped by instinct and environment rather than values. Cultivating a strong and virtuous character requires an active engagement in self-reflection and purposeful development. The majority of our goals and desires are passed down to us by a society intent upon self-destruction, and even seemingly Christian ideals are often polluted by worldly processes and motivations. Failing to contemplate the origin of our values or our methods for achieving them can leave us tethered to superficial aspirations and ineffective strategies, perpetuating the downward spiral of society into chaos.

We hear stories all the time of people who achieve massive success, and shortly afterwards, self-destruct under the pressure. Despite seemingly reaching the pinnacle of prosperity, they often experience a severe decline in mental and physical health, and may even become involved with persistent drug abuse or other destructive behaviors. They become detached from reality and unable to take criticism, which leads to the deterioration of personal

relationships and emotional stability. Infidelity fractures families, and emotional states fluctuate unpredictably between depression and rage. Even the greatest achievements can disintegrate into despair without a solid character to reinforce the individual against the pressures of life.

While this may seem like an extreme example, it's unfortunately not uncommon. Even if someone doesn't go quite that far, any step on the path of destruction negatively impacts your overall quality of life. Success itself doesn't drive people to madness, just as money doesn't inherently corrupt. Rather, an increase in material resources and social influence amplifies the *effects* of your behaviors. What was once manageable within a limited sphere of power now expands with increased influence, and the consequences of poor character or misguided actions become more pronounced. As the stakes rise, so do the repercussions, making it vital for us to build a strong character early on, in order to support the weight of success.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Hebrews 4:12

But character cannot be built by merely pursuing earthly desires. King Solomon writes, "Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain" (Psalm 127). How much of your life have you devoted to things that God never told you to build? Is it worth putting your hand to a task before knowing whether it will ultimately amount to nothing more than vanity? Left to our own devices, even the best of intentions can lead us astray, because we are inherently limited by our human nature. It's only through a lifestyle of obedience that we can overcome the pride, selfishness, and confusion that are anxious to destroy us. God's truth illuminates our flaws and shortcomings with perfect clarity. His word is *living* and *active*, because ***He is alive***, and very much at work in our development. He delights in every detail of our lives (Psalm 37:23), and has an opinion on what we do and who we become. His word pierces to the very core of our being and divides soul from spirit, meaning He takes us to the end of ourselves, so we can recognize where our feeble efforts

fall short, and His glory begins. God carefully forms us into people capable of carrying His Name faithfully, and that formation only comes on His terms. Without Him, even our best efforts are doomed. But a surrendered life follows in the footsteps of Jesus, gradually conforming us to His likeness until the image of God is *revealed* in our lives.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Romans 8:29

I highly encourage you to reject the popular narrative that success is simply the product of hard work and decades of experience. It's not that these things are unimportant, but they're not a magic formula. This belief is a product of the same culture that tells you the only way to be free of depression and anxiety is through the use of dangerous pharmaceuticals and talking through your problems with a therapist who likely has never experienced a comparable situation. This advice may be well-intentioned, but often stems from either ignorance, at best, or downright manipulation at worst. Either way, the result of this advice is that you remain trapped in the rat race; a complacent consumer who is unable to rise above the stagnation of mediocrity.

That being said, don't mistake shortcuts and laziness for innovation. It's vital for your character to be tested and tempered, and the only way for this to reliably occur is through engagement with a difficult process. Growth demands adversity that pushes you past your current limitations. Embracing such hardship should be seen as the true cheat codes, rather than shortcuts.

In short, when you find a worthwhile goal, commit to it. Just don't forget that while you may plant and water the seeds, it's only the Lord who makes them grow. Following the ways of the world will leave you pulled in a thousand directions, each promising fame, riches, and love. While you have free will to a certain extent, our decisions are made through the lens of layers upon layers of beliefs, programming, primal desires, and cognitive short-circuits that hopelessly distort our perspective and motives. Without dedication to a higher authority, these influences

will inevitably lead you astray. This proper anchoring in virtue is sorely lacking in society today, making it your responsibility to reject the shameful in favor of the honorable.

A strong character acts as a buffer against the flesh. How many great men and women come to ruin because of their choice in romantic partner? How many geniuses failed to create a long-term impact because they were blinded by greed or bitterness? How many have failed to build anything long-term because they consistently proved themselves untrustworthy?

Take a good long look at the reality of your moral strength. Without the conscious cultivation of virtue, we resign ourselves to the blindness of our unconscious, and the influences of a self-serving world. The absence of deliberate ethical development leaves us vulnerable to manipulation and our own instincts, forcing us to operate at the level of slaves and children.

Decide How to Show Up in the World

Just as a lifejacket prevents you from staying submerged underwater, a strong character also makes you buoyant. When you've submitted to the path that forges you into something meaningful, you can rise to the top despite any challenge. Someone with no skills or means of advancement is bound to the entry level in any given situation. However, a person of integrity and resilience will find opportunities wherever they are, because people will inevitably come to trust and rely upon them. In fact, it's often easier for someone with a strong character to move up than it is to stay put.

The story of Joseph is an excellent example of this. No matter how unfair of a situation Joseph found himself in, he trusted God, and allowed himself to be tested beyond what few of us can even imagine. He endured betrayal, enslavement, slander, unjust imprisonment, and ingratitude, but all the while he held fast to the promises of God. The Lord had revealed Joseph's future as a young boy, but that destination would require an exceptional amount of hardship before it would come to pass. All the while though, no matter how bleak the situation seemed, the Hand of God remained over Joseph's life. Despite being made a slave, he was quickly promoted to the highest position in his master's household. After enduring false allegations, he once again rose to the highest position possible for a prisoner, even being put in charge of his fellow inmates.

While the chain of events shaping Joseph's life may seem unfair to us, every step of the way prepared him to eventually manage the kingdom of Egypt. God prepared him for this great task by first entrusting him with smaller matters. In order for him to be trusted with the rule of a nation, he would first have to learn to lean on the Lord in a prison. It was extremely important to God that His servant be of the highest quality character before putting him on the public stage. This was a man who was called to play a major role in the history of the world, and who would ultimately be a bearer of the Lord's name. You may likewise find yourself in a similar situation, wondering why no matter how hard you work, things just don't break your way. It's possible that God is using this time to refine something in you at a much deeper level than you find

comfortable. But before He can trust you with greater things, you must first learn to manage what you already have according to His will. In the same way that Joseph faithfully served as a leader in every situation, so too will a godly character cause you to stand out in the best way possible despite unfavorable circumstances.

Many people skip this route. It's difficult, and necessitates the sacrifice of our ambitions in order to purify our motivations and desires. This path also comes with the promise, yes, *the promise*, of unfair adversity. You will be betrayed by those you least expect, slandered by the envious, persecuted without recourse, and all the while commanded by God to return these hardships with love, forgiveness, and gentleness. You will have to die to yourself over and over. You will have to learn to relinquish your right to offense, in order to allow the Lord to fight your battles for you. I can't tell you whether or not that road will lead to material wealth or prosperity, but I can tell you that every inch you shuffle closer to Jesus is worth more than all the kingdoms of earth.

On an extremely practical level, we can make the virtuous approach even more compelling by also considering this reality; no one else is doing it. If you're looking to start a business or personal brand, you're competing with a ton of other people playing the same game with the same strategy. The same concept applies to dating, traditional jobs, and everything else worth doing. Everyone is looking to culture for the latest trends and fads, but hardly anyone is looking inward to change the fundamental mechanics of who they are and how they think. Progress towards character growth may seem invisible at first, but so does the gradual decline of cheaters and liars. Just as the consequences of dishonesty eventually catch up, so too will the rewards of integrity and discipline. Stick to this path and it won't be long before you start outpacing the competition, not just in outward achievements, but in the depth and resilience of your psyche.

Doing business with people these days is extremely frustrating, and I'm not just complaining about inflation. Working with someone, building with them, dating them, being friends with them... it kind of sucks sometimes!

I'm blown away by how many salespeople never follow up with prospects even once. I talk to clients who tell me they've been trying to sign up with someone else, but that person doesn't even bother to return their calls. Of course, I'm happy for the opportunity to earn new business and won't complain. It is alarming however, to realize how few of the adults in our world conduct themselves in a professional manner.

You go out with someone and they don't even text back (don't overcomplicate this one, they don't like you). You hire a new employee who can't seem to show up on time. The people around you want adulation for doing the bare minimum and expect recognition for every small effort.

Never did I imagine the stress I'd encounter simply arguing with women over basic relationship standards. It's absurd that people get defensive when I say I'm not comfortable dating someone who's talking to other men. I've also seen many social media influencers build their platforms by promoting the idea that it's immature to even expect common decency from a partner—only children get jealous after all. They preach that everyone is beyond redemption and that the only solution is to win the race to the bottom. At least that way you can feel like you're in control while still living as a slave to your base impulses, and battered to and fro by the ever-shifting tides of culture.

I've wasted a lot of energy trying to convince people that the modern systems for things like dating and business, are broken, ineffective, and disgusting. If it really hasn't bothered you yet, maybe I'm wasting my breath. At this point, I'm more interested in speaking to those who are prepared to actually take responsibility for the trajectory of their lives—those who are mature enough to recognize that their actions affect others and who are willing to accept accountability for their decisions.

People are reluctant to address character flaws because it forces them to confront the fact that there's something actually wrong with them. It's easy to work on business strategies and mental health hacks, because at that point you're simply optimizing strategies. But to address habitual lying, selfishness, pride, bitterness, unreliability, entitlement, etc. Well, that gets uncomfortable pretty fast. Now we're not just tweaking the things we *do*, but making radical changes to who we *are*.

It's intimidating to confront the darkness in our hearts, but the alternative is to leave it there. We can turn the lights off if we want, but those demons don't go anywhere. They're still behind the scenes, pulling our strings. The difference is that now we can't see them, and we're unaware of the influence they have over the course of our lives. Those forces are not any less powerful simply because they're invisible. As painful as it is, the only way to see real change is to be willing to allow God's light to flood the depths of your heart. This will require time spent studying the Scriptures until God's word reprograms your thought processes. It will require time spent deep in prayer, wrestling with the Lord until He lifts His voice and bids the earth within you melt. It will require resolve to repent of your sins, to intentionally turn away from all that grieves the Holy Spirit, because He longs for you to become a place where He can rest.

If you avoid this process, you stand a good chance of becoming one of the horror story situations we just mentioned. You know; the type of story where someone gains the world and still ends their lives prematurely, because the pain of their day-to-day is too much to bear. They achieve everything they ever wanted in their lives, but the darkness they refused to confront seizes their newfound resources, and uses them to unleash havoc beyond imagination.

I remember being passed over for promotion in the United States Marine Corps when I was about 20. I fervently believed that my squad leader was being unfair. I wasn't the top performer in any one area, however, I was in the top 10% for every measurable area of competency. I got high scores on ability, knowledge and performance, but an overall negative review. My squad leader asked if I wanted honest feedback, or if I preferred to just gloss over things. I said, "yes. Tell me."

He informed me of something that day I really didn't want to hear, and it made me quite angry. He told me that I complained way too much, and that my general attitude and demeanor was extremely negative.

At first, I thought this was ridiculous and unfair, but after some reflection I realized he was right. I did complain constantly. In fact, I was complaining about being told I complain! Almost every word out of my mouth was sarcastic, and my attention was unwaveringly focused

on the negative for the majority of my day. I was so used to this poor mindset that I was as unaware of my attitude as the air I breathed.

This is a fantastic example of how character can act as the invisible forcefield either attracting or repulsing the people we interact with. I thought I was a great option for leadership because I highly proficient in infantry skills. The way I affected the people around me however, was toxic and counterproductive. But the thing is, I had no idea. All my friends behaved the same. In fact, I felt like I was a positive person simply because my friends complained more than I did! It wasn't until someone held up the mirror that I had the clarity to notice my flaws.

But once I stopped making excuses and started taking action while everyone else stayed stuck, my situation changed extremely quickly. The internal work was incredibly tough but once it was done, the external results almost seemed to happen on their own.

I'm often surprised by the simplicity of standing out from the crowd. Most of the competition doesn't even show up. Half of the ones who do are unprepared. Half of those leftover are only prepared for the task at hand but don't prepare the rest of their lives to accommodate the increase in responsibility. Out of those remaining, precious few have the consistency to last more than a season.

When it comes down to it, the competition is thin. The idea that you're up against millions of dedicated opponents with vast resources and unfair advantages is simply untrue. You really just have to get past a few basic levels before you're only competing with a handful of people. To make things even better, within this playing field is where you'll make friends and connections. So instead of trying to dominate everyone, you find a peer group with whom you can grow and experience life.

This isn't to say that things will be easy, because that also wouldn't be true. The point I'm making is that if you'll do the hard things and stop trying to cover character flaws with hype and shortcuts, they create so much integrity that you'll naturally add all the supplementary skills and qualifications that everyone is desperately scrambling to achieve. Character gives you a gravitational pull, attracting the right people and opportunities into your life. People want to work with others who are likable, trustworthy, reliable, hard working, honorable, inspirational, fair, disciplined, generous, and patient. Making character a priority draws others in naturally. It

sets you apart, not through force or manipulation, but as a breath of fresh air in a polluted environment. In a world that loves shortcuts, your genuine commitment to higher ideals becomes a valuable asset, effortlessly drawing others to your orbit.

You may be stressed because you can't figure out the route to "make it" in life. But I'm here to tell you, once you become the type of person who can't be ignored, you'll be overwhelmed by how many opportunities fall into your lap. When people recognize a strong, reliable character it encourages them to want to give you more responsibility. They'll see you in contrast to everyone who doesn't show up on time, tell the truth, do what they say, work, or behave consistently.

To sum up this section, take a moment to consider the following prompts. They are designed to help you break free from limited thinking in order to highlight areas with opportunity for growth in your character.

- Have I committed to goals/ambitions without asking God first?
 - Keep in mind; saying a prayer, then doing whatever you originally wanted to without waiting patiently for a response, is not faith.
- Have I prayed for results but rejected the process?
- What daily habits are undermining my character?
- What tasks or responsibilities have I been avoiding that, if addressed, could significantly free up mental/spiritual resources?
- How do I typically react to setbacks or challenges? Do these reactions reflect the teachings of Jesus?
- Are there any ways of thinking that, if surrendered to God's truth, could remove barriers and align me with His will and purpose for my life?
- Where am I resisting God's word?
 - For example, do I see myself according to who God says I am, or have I based my identity off other people? Am I living in unrepentant sin? Remember; religion is not a shield for those living in open rebellion against the Lord.
- What recurring thoughts or worries prevent me from fully stepping out in faith?

- I've found it deeply rewarding to ask God to reveal the root of my consistent struggles. It can be intimidating to inspect these wounds. But remember, He is the God who heals you (Exodus 15:26)
- How do I spend my free time? Are these activities that make sense in the context of intimacy with Jesus?
- What am I procrastinating?
- What are the things I'm currently doing that I know I shouldn't?
 - Reflecting on these in light of the psychological processes we just discussed can be quite fruitful. When we consider our weakness before the Lord, we open the door for His grace to flood our hearts with life giving waters.

Character Is as much a Journey as a Destination

Building character is like renovating a home while still living in it. It's an ongoing, process and we need to accept that there's a certain level of messiness that comes with it. Just as renovations involve dirt, disruption, and frustration, character development requires exposing the flaws, weaknesses, and inconsistencies within us. We have to demolish the corrupted structures, and rebuild with newfound knowledge and right understanding. This process is uncomfortable and will even feel counterproductive at times, but it's necessary for creating something stronger.

Setbacks and challenges are inevitable as you work on bettering yourself, but these are a necessary part of the journey. You've got to accept that growth involves discomfort, and remain steadfast in your commitment. In fact, one of the best things you can do for yourself is to embrace the discomfort. The sooner you get comfortable with your stomach turning itself into knots, the sooner you can start making decisions informed by reason, rather than fear.

That discomfort is often confused with "intuition" and "gut feelings." While gut feelings can be valuable, the problem is that most people can't distinguish between intuition and their insecurities, primal instincts, desires, cognitive biases, or the power of social influence. "Bad vibes" might just be resistance to change, fear of the unknown, or jealousy. When people are unable to regulate their emotions and act despite those feelings, they live trapped by the illusions generated by a disordered unconscious. The result is that when they come into contact with the darkness in their hearts, they turn away in fear, rather than digging their heels in and fighting back.

Character development is a lifelong journey. You'll never reach a point where you are complete and perfect until Jesus returns. Until we are fully united, there will always be room to grow closer to Him. This shouldn't be seen as stressful or intimidating but as an exciting adventure. Being conformed into the image of Christ will be challenging, but it's certainly not boring. It means you have a never-ending source of continuous reflection, listening, learning, and experimentation, as new challenges lead to new experiences and breakthroughs. Acknowledge

that growth is always uncomfortable and remain determined to persevere regardless of the resistance.

Character development isn't something you can take a stab at every once in a while and expect to see results. People often neglect their integrity and hope for the best, but when faced with crucial decisions they lack the internal strength necessary to stand firm under the pressure. Jesus calls us to a life of faithful obedience, shaping our souls according to His example. Following Him requires a daily commitment to lay aside our own ways and pursue righteousness. It was not a suggestion when He commanded that we take up our cross and follow Him. He also doesn't require us to do anything He hasn't already accomplished, nor does He send us anywhere alone. True integrity isn't developed in moments of ease or through self-help doctrine, but through a consistent, disciplined walk with God. Only by anchoring ourselves in Christ can we build the spiritual resilience to withstand temptation, make godly decisions, and remain faithful, even when it costs us everything. A heart surrendered to Him is one that will endure and prevail, fortified by His truth and grace.

To seek wisdom is to seek Jesus, for in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). True wisdom begins with a reverent fear of the Lord, and it is only by following Jesus that we gain understanding of His will— obedience to which is what produces a transformed heart. As the Holy Spirit guides us in His footsteps, we learn to value eternal truths over temporary gains. Sacrifice takes on a totally new meaning as we contemplate our complete dependency on His grace. Recognition of our need for Him draws us in close, and His very proximity changes us without our realizing it. Suddenly, our desire becomes to walk in righteousness over selfish ambition, and to value the riches of heaven above anything this world can offer. Walking with Jesus in part requires that we turn away from our old selves, and submitting to the work He wants to do within us. The character development that comes from His Hand leads to a life abundant with purpose, integrity, and authority in the age to come. But most importantly, as we draw near to God, he draws near to us (James 4:8).

A lack of strength is an opportunity for growth. Moments of weakness draw our attention to areas we need to work on. Every lie you tell, every compromise you make, is a chance to

recognize you've fallen short and to correct your course. Don't try to hide these moments from yourself or God, but embrace them as light is shed upon the cracks in your integrity. Growth requires active engagement with challenges, and you must learn to leverage each one as an opportunity to internalize your values and principles. If your moral fortitude hasn't been regularly tested and strengthened, you will be unprepared in times of adversity. Your strength will falter when storms come and the pressures of life will bear down upon your shoulders with more force than you'll ever think to imagine. It's in these moments of trial that the purity of your heart is revealed and refined.

Moments to work on your character are all around you. Whether it's handling a difficult conversation, responding to criticism, telling the truth, refusing to cut corners, and all the other choices you make when no one is watching. Every moment is a chance to grow. Instead of seeing uncomfortable situations as obstacles, force yourself to view them for what they are; chances to be tempered like precious gold.

Deciding to live every day with generosity, kindness, and self-control, you build a character capable of withstanding life's perpetual testing. Capitalizing on these opportunities requires you to be mindful of your actions and their impact, and intentional with your decisions. Many of the systemic issues afflicting you began with seemingly small compromises. The sooner you recognize the minutia that these major issues are rooted in, the sooner you can begin to shift your behaviors away from self-destruction, and towards self-actualization.

Get Anchored in Core Values

The course you take is determined by the influence of your most deeply held values. However, these values may not always be what you consciously believe them to be. For instance you may think you value honesty, but if your actions consistently demonstrate otherwise, then it's possible that something else holds a deeper place in your heart. This disconnect between what we claim to value and what truly drives us often goes unnoticed. To observe a sharp contrast between reality and how we like to see ourselves is quite uncomfortable. In fact, it's so uncomfortable that your brain has a mechanism hardwired in to protect you from this feeling altogether. This mechanism is called "cognitive dissonance."

Cognitive dissonance is the internal conflict that arises when your actions or decisions stand in opposition to your beliefs, values, and integrity. When you compromise your principles, it's the discomfort you feel that keeps you from thinking too much about it. You like to see yourself as a good person, and your brain wants to protect your self-image. Because of this, when the evidence points to actions that contradict your values, your mind attempts to justify, downplay, or completely ignore the inconsistency. What arises inside you is a discomfort that pushes your attention away from itself like a magnetic field. Instead of confronting this feeling, you might rationalize your behavior, convincing yourself that the transgression wasn't important or didn't happen. Perhaps you believe your actions were an isolated event, the product of extenuating circumstances. Maybe they weren't important. After all, you're different from everyone else. But listen closely; you are vulnerable to the same compromises that have caused the downfall of kings and nations.

The lives of Israel's kings show how even those anointed by God can fall prey to compromise when their eyes begin to drift towards the things of this world. Saul's pride, David's desires, and Solomon's compromises led to national turmoil and wasted potential. These mistakes began as small cracks in the walls, but ended as fractures in their their legacies. We are no different. If the allure of lesser things affected these great men, surely we must be even more vigilant with what we have been entrusted. Despite what we may think we're just as capable of

rationalizing such destructive decisions. Our only hope is to remain firmly rooted in God, refreshing our strength from His life-giving waters every single day.

You must resist at all times, the urge to allow yourself to turn a blind eye on your weakness. This avoidance does nothing more than erode your character, creating a widening gap between who you believe you are and how you actually live. To grow and maintain integrity, it's essential to recognize these moments and resolve the tension of cognitive dissonance rather than letting it fester. This tension can push you to perform mental gymnastics in an effort to protect the fragility of your ego. Practically speaking, this can look like avoiding people with differing beliefs, overlooking your inconsistencies, or justifying your wrongdoings. Guilt is an unpleasant emotion that often seems easier to just avoid. But over time, these rationalizations add up. They weaken your integrity and prevent you from properly diagnosing your habitual shortcomings.

We'd like to believe in the inherent purity of our motives, but the reality is that much of what we do and think is shaped by unconscious fears and desires. We may say we hold the value of faithfulness, but that fidelity will be challenged by our lust, the temptations of the world, our fear of being unwanted, the pride that makes us think we deserve to have our desires met, as well as any number of other hidden impulses that create internal tension. Faithfulness to our spouse is our value, but whether or not we act that out consistently is determined by our character. That character is under a constant assault from many directions at once. If it is weak, the pressures we face can easily overwhelm our strength. This doesn't just happen all at once either. Oftentimes it begins with small compromises that produce cracks in our resolve, leading us to justify our actions and leaving us at the mercy of fleeting desires.

To reveal these hidden motives, ask God for revelation, and begin to examine the patterns in your life. The evidence for your character is demonstrated in the decisions you consistently make, the situations you avoid, and the thoughts that dominate your attention. These point to the true hierarchy of your values, because *patterns reveal motives*. It's difficult to discover these patterns on your own however. It's usually only after extremely intense self-reflection, or through the feedback of others that the illusion of our self-image is broken. This is one reason why it's beneficial to surround yourself with a healthy church family. Even though the Holy Spirit is our teacher, He often uses other believers to convey His lessons.

We resist seeing ourselves in a negative light, and in an effort to do so we become blind to reality and isolate ourselves from any who might challenge us. This causes us to overlook the issues most in need of attention. Our self-image is dismantled when we recognize its true nature. This experience tends to be painful, but a willing acceptance of the process can supercharge your personal growth. Without these moments of clarity, we remain trapped in a cycle of self-deception, unaware of our chains, and unable to escape.

For example, I only recently learned that I struggle with fear. I've always considered myself to be someone who handles trepidation with grace. I thought I was courageous in taking on challenges regardless of anxiety. What took me almost thirty years to process however, was the destruction that "*worry*" had wreaked upon my life. While I'd taken many big opportunities throughout my journey, I had torn myself apart at every step by fixating on an endless host of possible negative outcomes. I had confidence in myself to take on exciting challenges, but secretly believed the most likely outcome to be eventual self-destruction. I have always felt crushed beneath the immense weight of insecurity. To be around most people is to imagine myself under the scrutiny of the most critical of gazes. The resulting tension leaves me unable to fully engage in relationships, leading to isolation, which in turn reinforces the fear that I'm not good enough. This is an excellent example of insidious character flaws seeping into unexpected places.

It's important to weigh every decision you make in light of God's word. Is it wise to proceed with something that sounds like a good idea, but is really an offense against the King of Heaven?

You may read that and think; "oh no, that sounds exhausting! Every decision?"

Well, yes. The thought of taking charge of every negative thought can seem intimidating at first because you know it'll be a lot of work. But why is it so much work? It's hard right now because there's a mountain of thoughts and actions you don't have any control over. The fact that you even recognize the work proves that a great deal of what goes on in your head is undesirable.

Primal instincts and unconscious forces dominate your decision-making process. If you don't want to live like an animal, you need to surrender your will to God so He can bring those

instincts under the authority of Jesus Christ. Even though you're ultimately not the one doing the work, it will still require much effort from you. It will be overwhelming at first but this will help develop endurance. Like any muscle, your discipline and internal fortitude grow stronger the more you utilize them. It's ok if you need to start small. If you're being honest with yourself, there's already at least a few vices you know you need to be free from. What's more, it won't take much energy for you to identify the ways those negative patterns present themselves through the small, mundane decisions of day-to-day life.

Start choosing to shift away from those destructive behaviors, one decision at a time. Find the everyday moments that have gone overlooked and use them as the small disruption that leads to an avalanche. Over time this practice becomes second nature. It seems like a burden at first, but once it becomes ingrained as a habit and part of your identity, it's easier to behave with integrity than to violate wisdom. The more you exercise virtue, the less you'll be at the mercy of impulsivity. What once seemed to take a tremendous amount of energy now feels refreshing.

Learn to Love Adversity

I hate to be the one to break it to you, but your character won't develop through a journaling routine. You can certainly use your quiet time to set resolutions and chart a course, but *action* is the catalyst for transformation.

How do authors develop their characters? By sending them out on adventures and getting them into trouble. How do characters in video games become stronger? By exploring new territory, discovering valuable tools, and defeating powerful enemies. When it comes to growth, there's simply no substitute for the refining friction of adversity.

One of my favorite story arcs is the progression from underdog to legend. At the beginning of the story, the hero is under-qualified and naive. Unable to take on the final challenge just yet, the task must be broken down into smaller steps. Those steps look like a series of somewhat manageable battles that progressively stretch the hero to new levels. This growth generates successive victories that build strength and momentum. By the time the hero has defeated the villain, others in the story look at him/her as also being powerful. From our vantage point, the growth was so incremental it's hard to notice. You see the vulnerabilities of the hero as he/she develops. But those watching from the outside only see the triumph. After a few books or games, that former underdog has matured into the safe bet that everyone wants to work with.

I'd like to encourage you to see your life in a similar way. You may not feel capable of overcoming great adversity, but if you can lock in long enough to stack up smaller victories, you'll grow into the position gradually. This is not only a practical approach, but a safer one as well. By focusing on character growth rather than external results, you *become* a person capable of handling great opportunities. This also prevents you from getting too frustrated when the pace feels monotonous.

Facing challenges takes courage, and success requires resilience, perseverance, and innovation. The good news is that challenge is never far away. There is opportunity disguised as discomfort in your life at this very moment. Embrace these challenges as stepping stones and they will take you further along the path of becoming a stronger, wiser person. By facing them

head-on, you capture the momentum of obstacles and transform it into a catalyst for growth. Every hardship is a doorway to breakthrough, but it's up to you to walk through it.

When we understand that God truly works all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28), we begin to appreciate each challenge as an opportunity for Him to work on us. Moses was called from the wilderness and Joseph was repeatedly rescued from captivity. God is the master of using the toughest situations to develop His friends. The endurance we need to accomplish His purpose is built in private, long before the path begins to make any sense. Remember the Biblical heroes and the great feats God accomplished through them. He is the same today as He was back then. Generation after generation, the Lord patiently inclines Himself towards any who will give Him an ear. Whatever challenge you may be facing, your strength comes from the One who parted the seas, opened the earth to swallow His enemies, and rained down fire from heaven. He is unchanging and faithful throughout the ages.

His power is unmatched and unfathomable, and His commitment to His children is unwavering. No battle is too great for Him, but neither is it too small. David writes that “He has not ignored or belittled the suffering of the needy. He has not turned his back on them, but has listened to their cries for help (Psalm 34:6).” Another Psalm tells us that God delights in every detail of our lives (Psalm 37:23). From this, we can begin to understand that no moment is too small to invite God into. There’s no problem we face that He wants you to handle on your own. In fact, I want you to begin to see each minor battle as training for what’s ahead. Remember, if you don’t learn to fight against the bear and the lion *God’s way*, then how will you be prepared to stand firm when all hell breaks loose?

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
Psalm 91:1

Get serious about inviting God into every moment of your life. Begin a discipline of daily prayer. If you struggle to pray longer than five minutes, use Scripture as a prompt. Read each verse carefully, and begin talking to God about whatever comes to mind. It makes no sense to

give God less time than you spend in the shower and expect to be filled. The verse above says that he who *dwells* in the secret place is the one who *abides* in God's shadow. In other words; you must come to prayer with the expectation that "this is where I live." That time with the Lord is where you pitch your tent and make your home. It's somewhere you intend to camp-out in for as long as you can. To pray without ceasing, to experience the *abiding* life, for each moment to be filled with an awareness of His closeness, this is the goal. But it comes as the result of the discipline to dwell.

If a soldier fails to train for war, he will be unprepared when the enemy comes. If you will not establish a daily time with God, your roots will never grow deep enough to withstand the storms on the horizon. Many Christians mentally consent to the idea of God, but don't prioritize their relationship with Him. Because of this, God feels distant, vague and separate. Without intimacy our faith becomes shallow and shaky. However, the rest of Psalm 91 promises that God will protect, deliver, and be with those who trust in Him. He guards them from harm, and surrounds them with His unfailing love and mercy. We can trust God to be at work on our character through every battle, while simultaneously winning the fight for us. He wants to use even small, daily struggles to strengthen our faith and draw us closer to Him. Each trial is an open door to opportunity if we will but learn to dwell in His presence. A true relationship with Him requires the willingness to let Him change us. When we commit to daily time in prayer and study, God begins to reveal Himself more deeply and more powerfully. Our hearts and minds are caught up in His, and we can't help but be transformed into His likeness. Our faith becomes rooted in real experience and we are strengthened by His wisdom and empowered by His Spirit.

The next time a frustration or challenge arises, take it before the Lord, desiring His perspective over your own. Reflect on scripture daily, particularly verses that move your spirit. Remember to give Him thanks in all things, lifting up praise for even the smallest victories. Surround yourself with others looking to be discipled as well. There is incredible power in the Church; a fact our culture seems to have forgotten. Lastly, stop being so afraid. The Lord will fight for you. You need only be still (Exodus 14:14)

Leverage the Power of Habit

By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.

Matthew 7:16-18

Most of what we think of as our “personality” is simply habit that could be changed if we were willing. Character is a habit as well, but it’s much more deeply ingrained than personality. It’s not just a habit of action but of thinking and being. The decisions we consistently make are the clearest indicator of our values. The habits we develop point to the orientation of our character. By exploring their source, we can identify the values or vices dictating our lives. By understanding where these habits come from we become equipped with the leverage to change them. We can use this knowledge to change counterproductive habits and initiate new ones that better align with our goals.

If you don’t know where to start, the first step might not be so much about doing something new as it is about putting an end to the things you *shouldn’t* be doing.

For example:

- What is the most self-destructive thing you’re consistently doing?
 - What are three ways you can put an end to it?
- Next; what is the most positive action you could do right now to produce change?

You probably already know these answers, but have neglected to ask the question. I’m constantly amazed by how many of my problems have simple solutions. The real issue tends to come not so much from the complexity of the issue as my lack of rational analysis. Oftentimes, the keys to our transformation lie hidden beneath the unremarkable. They’re in the everyday decisions, the minor frustrations, the tone we take with others, the fantasies we entertain, and the discipline we either lack or display. These small, overlooked moments tend to be what make or

break us. They remain unchanged because they are too unglamorous to capture our attention or stimulate our imagination. However, by consistently choosing to act with integrity in regards to the ordinary, we prepare ourselves to rise to the extraordinary.

Discipleship requires we bring Jesus into even the smallest, most ordinary parts of our lives. Inviting Him into these unremarkable moments is much the same as sharing your day with any other loved one. The activity stays the same, but your experience of it is dramatically altered. Rather than simply going about the mundane routines you've grown familiar with, every minute becomes an open doorway into the Heart of our Creator. It's not possible to pursue this love as a lifestyle without gradually removing the habits and behaviors that create separation between you and God. Just as certain behaviors will cause issues in any human relationship, so too will unrepentant sin drive a wedge between you and the Lord if allowed to remain.

The good news is that God's love is far stronger than any guilt you bring to the table. Jesus already wrestled the full weight of our sin to the grave and left it there when He walked out three days later. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. However, the depth of your walk with Him will hit limits when it runs into habitual sin. For example; you can wake up every morning and celebrate the incredible mercy of the Father, but at some point you are also meant to carry that mercy out into the world. Refusing to forgive those who hurt you will eventually stunt your spiritual growth. I'm not suggesting that God will love you less, but He will take issue with you holding onto something despite the pressure of His conviction.

Intimacy is connected to holiness. There's aspects of God you simply can't understand until you come along side Him and walk the path He has tread throughout the ages. We are often deceived into believing that our patterns of behavior make up the substance of our being. But while there's certainly a connection between who we are and what we do, Scripture is very clear that where we were when God found us is not where He's going to leave us. Jesus meant what He said when He told Nicodemus "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3)." The jokes you tell, the compromises you make, the failures you've accepted; all these are things that God will change in you if you allow Him.

It may be helpful to think of yourself as a perfectly chiseled statue that has been covered in clay. The clay, or, the earthy nature, is what you and society have been molding all your life.

Your environment imprinted its own image on this earthly nature, and your frustrated hands did their best to shape the result into something halfway acceptable. The reality however, is that your true nature is hidden beneath the dirt we walk upon. Time spent in the presence of God is like a refreshing rain that washes away the accumulated mud and muck. He will remove all that is not of Himself, and will instead clothe you in righteousness and perfume you with the incense of His Holy Spirit.

“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much” (Luke 16:10). The daily choices to continue wallowing in the mud, or to submit to the divine process of restoration is a battle we must choose over and over again. The thoughts we entertain, the words we speak, the virtue we practice; these are the materials Jesus uses to build our house upon His foundation. While we aren’t defined by our habits, these actions do shape our character. You may feel helpless to change the patterns in your life, but He is fully capable of overcoming them on your behalf if you will simply yield to Him. That can look like handling situations based off of Scripture rather than instinct. Some examples of this are; forgiving offense and injury, responding gently to the belligerent, and choosing humility when tempted to boast.

Jesus doesn’t just save our eternities, He also wants to redeem our lives! What we feel is impossible to overcome, He has already defeated. Though habits are truly a force of nature, we persist against them in response to the One who hung the stars in the sky, and formed the earth by His Word. One of the highest-leverage activities you can engage in is creating good habits and breaking bad ones. But the single most important habit is the daily, disciplined pursuit of the Lord. From there He will lead you in the establishment of better ways of living. If you spend the next 1-3 years intentionally creating as many good habits, and destroying as many bad ones as you can, you’ll generate a considerable amount of momentum. This means you won’t have to spend as much energy getting the little things right because they’ll be ingrained in your daily routine and unconscious thought processes. But you have take this seriously, as your natural tendency is towards entropy rather than productivity.

Choose the Ancient Paths and Walk with Heroes

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Hebrews 12:1-2

Who you look up to bears tremendous influence on the person you become. It's not that you *have* to emulate those around you, but the reality is that they're going to rub off on you, like it or not. We're social creatures and our unconscious automatically adjusts our internal rhythms to synch up with those around us.

Something I often point out is the value of recognizing the voices in your ear. Influence doesn't just come from those standing shoulder to shoulder with you at work. It's not just your family and friends, but also the media you consume, the books you read, and the music you listen to. It's not reasonable to expect to live a happy life when you spend your commute listening to breakup songs. It's silly to think you'll be satisfied in a relationship if the music you listen to is about sleeping around and doing drugs, especially when you cap that off with porn and multiple hours on social media. It's illogical to believe you can recognize God's Voice when you listen to the world sunrise to sunset, and barely give Him the time of day.

They say you're the sum total of the five people you spend the most time with. Personally, I think that's a pretty ridiculous statement. Sure, there's *some* truth to it, but you're not doomed to stay at the level of the people in your life. If that were the case, there'd be no hope of escaping your current circumstances! That being said, if you keep living and thinking like everyone else, you will certainly remain stuck. You've got to take steps to separate yourself from the crowd, or inertia will keep you exactly where you are. Many people fall into the trap of believing that things will change on their own over time. But while this is true to some extent, that change tends to be for the worse when you're not proactive.

You need to do everything you can to surround yourself with people who are moving in the same direction as you want to go. It doesn't have to be the *exact* same path, but get as close as you can. Over time, new doors will open, new relationships will form, and your direction—and your peer group—will become more focused. It may start as just going "somewhere," but it refines with each step. However, there are limits to this. Finding top performers to spend time with may be challenging for a high-schooler. Finding a financial mentor may be difficult for someone in an impoverished area. That being said, opportunities are always available to those resourceful enough to find them. Stay vigilant and seek out your community of mentors and friends intentionally. Don't get discouraged if building that tribe takes time. It's a process, and every connection is a step forward.

In the meantime, focus on what you can control. Maybe you can't hang out with business owners just yet, but plenty of those people have podcasts or YouTube channels. You can seek out uplifting music that doesn't engage your primal desires like pride, lust, or pain— but something that elevates your thoughts rather than pulling them down. How much quality content can you surround yourself with? How much time can you spend in the Scriptures? What might happen if you allowed the word of God to completely reprogram your unconscious mind? Fill your mind with ideas, inspiration, and wisdom that help push you beyond your current circumstances. The right influences might not be physically present in your life right now, but you can still choose what you surround yourself with. In choosing to surround yourself with the teachings and the Body of Christ, you invite the wisdom of godly influences into your life. Even if you don't have mentors or role models nearby, you can immerse yourself in the Word, learning from those who walked in faith before you. Seek out Biblical community, and begin learning what it means to love the Bride. We're simply not meant to be lone wolves. Jesus took twelve disciples with Him, and the Apostle Paul was never sent out alone. You need a strong community to support you, and friends of God to look up to.

Having the right mentors in your life is like a cheat code—they'll save you time and struggle like nothing else can. Drop the ridiculous, prideful idea of making it on your own. No one reaches their full potential in isolation; you need a team. Find the right people to go to the top with, and not only will success come faster, but the journey will be much more enjoyable,

and the success more meaningful. Surrounding yourself with experienced guides and supportive allies turns the journey into something far more rewarding than you could ever produce on your own. Seeking to associate with people of strong character will help keep you oriented toward the right habits and thought processes, as well as making you self-conscious when you do anything to violate your integrity.

Also understand however, that you'll have different mentors for different areas of life. The individual who taught me almost everything I know about navigating complex social systems and understanding corporate politics, did not have a strong moral foundation. The man who taught me public speaking was a drug addict. Many of the early mentors I had in sales were either dishonest or lazy. It's important to recognize that some people will teach you skills, and some will teach you how to live, but none of them will be perfect. We're all human. You'll need to learn to separate the valuable lessons from the flaws of the person teaching them. Take what you can use, but always be mindful of the bigger picture and stay true to the Lord.

That being said, should you shun the voice of these people because they're flawed? Are you doomed to integrate their moral failings along with their advice? No. Because *you're not the sum of those around you*. You'll be surrounded by imperfect people, and you'll fit right in because you're just as flawed! We all have issues. Many people will have something valuable to teach you, with lessons in what not to do baked in as well. It's on you to filter the wisdom from the mistakes and apply those lessons better than they did.

One thing I'd like to hone in on is how important it is to seek after people with good character. I need to emphasize this because these individuals often go unnoticed by the world. We tend to mistake honesty for predictability, stability for dullness, and humility for weakness. But these traits are the backbone of true strength and integrity. People of character are not typically the loudest in the room or the flashiest, but their strength doesn't come from recognition. It's crucial to find and associate with them, even if they don't fit the self-aggrandizing mold that society tends to glorify.

You should make it a point to find people with strong character to look up to. They may be simple, unassuming individuals, but wisdom isn't always marked by status or success. While character and integrity can certainly lead to those things, they don't guarantee them. Wisdom and

character are expressed through the unique lens of each person's disposition and personality. Just because someone isn't flashy or famous doesn't mean they don't have something valuable to teach you. It's not their appearance, but their depth that truly matters.

Play the Ultimate Game

Growing as a person of character has many similarities with developing an avatar in a video-game. I'm not the first to make this observation, but thinking of challenges as if I were playing a game has been extremely helpful. I have a bad habit of seeing opportunities as inconveniences, but life is more exciting when you learn to see it as play. The extra work becomes side quests that produce unexpected rewards. The long hours of work become training sessions, preparing you for an adventure you didn't know was coming. A slow start to life turns from frustration to excitement, when you when you recognize it as an origin story. You're not meant to go through your whole life playing on the same level.

This mindset reframes obstacles as opportunities for growth. Just like in a game, each level of difficulty you overcome strengthens your character and equips you for what lies ahead. When you start viewing everything this way, it turns the mundane into something meaningful, and allows you to approach challenges with a sense of curiosity and excitement rather than dread. Instead of being overwhelmed by the journey, you become eager to see what the next level has in store.

In a video game, you're given a character with certain traits and abilities. Your job as the player is to learn to utilize the character's attributes as effectively as possible within the environment of the game, to maximize your chances of success. The funny thing is, when you think this way, the strategy is pretty simple. You don't think twice about sending the avatar into dangerous situations to explore new territory and gain experience. Interestingly enough, the currency used in many games for character development is termed "experience points."

Applying this concept to real life, it becomes clear that the challenges and risks we face operate on the same principles. Each trial or obstacle is like a mission that grants us needed experience for our journey. Instead of shying away from difficulties, we should leverage them as opportunities to gain experience points. The more we engage with these challenges, the stronger and more skilled we become, just like in a game. This perspective turns every adversity into a

valuable chance for development, helping us to continually advance and improve our real-life “character.”

Within the confines of the game, the path forward makes perfect sense. Part of the reason games are so successful is because they follow archetypal patterns that are deeply ingrained in the framework of our unconscious. When we play out these simplified versions of life, we don’t need anyone to teach us what to do. After a brief tutorial, it’s almost like instinct kicks in. We use a process of trial and error to make progress, and this experience is rewarded with progressive upgrades in abilities like strength, health capacity, and special powers.

This intuitive grasp of game mechanics offers valuable insight into our psyche. Just as in games, where each challenge provides opportunities for growth and skill enhancement, real-life experiences shape our personal development. The key is to recognize that the same principles apply—experimentation, trial and error, and persistence. By viewing our journey through the lens of a game, we can more easily navigate obstacles and appreciate the process of adventurous improvement, turning life's complexities into a series of manageable, and relatively enjoyable quests and achievements.

Just as every minor victory in a game strengthens our abilities, every trial in life equips us to handle the next. With this mindset, setbacks aren’t failures, but stepping stones to greater depths of perseverance, wisdom, and faith. Recognizing that God truly has a great intention for our future helps us stop dreading discomfort. Instead we are freed to enjoy the journey as the adventure He always meant it to be. It’s easy to look back on the great figures of history and admire their stories. But the truth is that the story was unsettling and challenging as it played out for them. They didn’t have the benefit of hindsight to know how their trials would end, otherwise their faith would be meaningless. When (most healthy) people play a game, they don’t allow losses and frustrations on the screen to disrupt the rest of their lives. They understand that the game is temporary, and remain detached enough to enjoy the experience without becoming ruled by it. Likewise, God is already at the end of our struggle, and knows exactly how it’s going to play out. He also understands that we lack His perspective, and chose to fully identify with us by coming to live, suffer, and die, by our side. How amazing is that? How might we approach things differently with the understanding this life is truly transient and fading?

You'll start to realize that the things we choose to pursue should not dominate our desires. Instead, these goals are simply motivators that move us through a process designed to teach us something. Running over a line with a ball doesn't offer any intrinsic reward. But scoring the winning touchdown during a big game obviously has massive implications. Through the pursuit of that victory you learn teamwork, perseverance, dedication, and many other valuable character traits. Comparing life to a video game is not meant to trivialize it, but to illustrate the need for a broader viewpoint that we might see the value in what this process does to us.

It's fun to live vicariously through an avatar, but it's worth thinking about why we don't apply this same level of enthusiasm to daily life as well. As children, we would explore everything. We'd touch anything unfamiliar to learn about its nature, and if something were particularly interesting, it would likely find its way into our mouths. We were curious about everything and got ourselves in and out of trouble every day. Somewhere along the way, that childlike curiosity began to fade. We become more cautious and less willing to take risks or make mistakes. The world started to feel more rigid, and we stopped exploring with the same sense of wonder. Fear replaced openness, and complacency corrupted our sense of wonder. Over the decades we dig ourselves deeper and deeper into a rut, and our passion for life is usurped by the existential dread of routine leading to slow decay.

But what if we approached life with the same boldness we had as children? What if we allowed ourselves to be curious again, to embrace the unknown, and to see challenges as opportunities to satisfy our curiosity? The instincts that kick in when we play a game are waiting just beneath the surface to take us to the next phase of life. That means you already know what to do to level up and enjoy your life to the fullest, so it's time to start asking what's stopping you from taking action. By rekindling that adventurous spirit, we can rediscover the excitement we lost to apathy, and start approaching every day with expectancy and enthusiasm.

For clarification, when I say "enjoy your life," I'm not talking about a hedonistic approach. The cultural narrative that says, "live your best life," is fundamentally rooted in selfishness. What's more, the things this mindset encourages are always short-sighted,

materialistic, and superficial. The best version of you isn't the one who takes more vacations, but the one who fully engages in the process of life according to the teachings of Christ. The best version of you is the one humble enough to not shy away from looking foolish, in order to learn something new. It's the version who says yes to opportunity and challenge, embraces discomfort as a pathway to growth, and who doesn't run from persecution. This version doesn't avoid the hard work because of uncertainty or potential failure. Instead, it faces the discomfort head-on and becomes stronger through each experience. It's the version of you that refuses to stay down no matter how badly defeat may sting, knowing that your steps are still ordered and every hair of your head still numbered by God.

Learn to see your situation through the lens of maximizing experience points, so you can upgrade your character traits and progress to higher levels of the "game." This mindset turns even the most monotonous situations into opportunities for unlocking unrealized potential. When something isn't working learn to keep experimenting until you figure it out, instead of wasting time blaming others. Obstacles become part of the process and each challenge another training session.

When your dreams seem out of reach, you begin to see this as a problem to be solved *systematically*, rather than as a limitation. Instead of feeling doomed to remain stuck in your current position, you train yourself to recognize potential solutions and to outgrow your boundaries. With this way of thinking, life becomes less about immediate gratification and more about strategy, growth, and persistence.

Remember that I'm not speaking from the perspective of reaching any one particular goal. Most of the goals we set in the beginning are fairly superficial anyway. That's ok though, because you can't just dive straight into the deep end. Instead, you begin by setting the best goal you can with the knowledge you have at the time, and begin moving towards it. With each step you gain skill and perspective you didn't have before. This progression opens your eyes to possibilities and opportunities only available to those willing to venture out of their comfort zones.

As you progress, if you're paying attention, you'll start to notice problems—both with the goal itself and with your ability to achieve it. You'll also become more aware of the systems

governing its access. Pursuing the unknown pushes you outside of your comfort zone. Through the process of trial and error, you not only move closer to your original goal but also expand beyond it, realizing that what once seemed to be the pinnacle of success was little more than a stepping stone. What began as an amateurish objective evolves into something much more significant as God uses the journey to process and refine you.

In the game, the desired character traits might be things like combat skills and stamina, but in real life they are far more valuable. The traits you cultivate—integrity, patience, godliness—are the true markers of success. Remember that learning to achieve goals doesn't guarantee character development. Many individuals attain success without becoming better people. High achievers aren't necessarily high in virtue, and material success tends to be deceiving. I want to make sure you don't confuse worldly endeavors with spiritual gold. However, the pursuit of these goals can certainly act as pathways of personal development. When properly directed by and rooted in Christ, the challenges we face in striving for success can refine our character, teach us discipline, and sharpen our understanding.

Work is a shadow of life. Life isn't about work, but all the themes and patterns of life are reflected within it. If you can learn to view your work as a microcosm for your overall life, it will transform your perspective. Work becomes a training ground for character development. When you allow laziness to seep into your 9-5, it inevitably affects how you show up in other areas such as your relationships and self-discipline. The mindset you bring to perfecting your craft directly impacts your ability to tackle greater, more existential challenges.

Work issues, such as learning new skills or managing people, have a way of bleeding over into everything else. The same passion that drives excellence in your career can also propel you to confront and resolve secret personal flaws. It can motivate you to have difficult conversations with people in the interest of developing unity, rather than allowing division to corrode the integrity of society. It strengthens you to resolve problems rather than sweeping them under the rug, and empowers you to become a *peace-maker* rather than a *peace-keeper*. Whether you're building a business or navigating difficult relationships, the lessons learned in one area

have widespread application, helping you evolve into a more complete person and ensuring there is no limit to the resources available.

It's one thing to practice a skill you believe will make money, but it's quite another to confront the vices and corruption that keep you bound to your old self. Strong character is forged by consistently choosing the virtuous path, even when faced with the relentless temptations of instant gratification and short-term gains. It's something you can practice everywhere—at work, within friendships, how you treat others, at the gym, in your hobbies and in your free time.

Every aspect of life is intricately connected to the whole. How you show up in one area will reflect in the rest. Building character isn't limited to isolated moments of discipline or difficult ethical dilemmas. It's a continual process that demands an integration of virtue into every arena of endeavor.

Imagine standing under multiple lights that cast shadows from different angles. Each shadow looks slightly different depending on where the light is coming from, but it's still *your* shadow. Life works the same way—relationships, work, and personal growth are all different angles of the greater whole. Unlike a physical shadow, though, these reflections influence the source they're cast from. How you engage with your work and relationships will ultimately shape your soul. This realization can be uncomfortable because deep down, we know we have bad habits, and we often don't give our best.

Fortunately, our hope isn't in our ability, but in our mediator! Our hope is in Jesus, who has already lived the life we couldn't, and who offers us His perfection in place of our iniquity. Rather than expecting us to do the impossible, He longs for us to bring every struggle to Him. His grace covers the lives of those who Love Him, and no good thing is withheld for the one who overcomes. The adversity before us was hand chosen by God. It is meant to test, not to destroy. Take heart in knowing that what you face was designed to bring you closer to the Lord, and that He has already overcome everything the world has to throw at you.

Is there Purpose in Pain?

As society becomes increasingly fixated on the superficial, having a strong character is more important than ever. In a world obsessed with appearances, a reputation for integrity will set you apart and make others feel safe enough to trust you. When you consistently live with strong character, others will naturally speak highly of you, and that respect generates influence. This influence will open doors for conducting business, receiving support, and even attracting a partner who values the same depth of character.

A strong character weathers the storms of life with dignity. It makes you resilient in the face of adversity and adaptable in ever-changing circumstances. This strength doesn't depend on external conditions but flows from a place of internal consistency, giving you the emotional stability that so many lack. By cultivating this strength, you'll become confident, even in situations where you feel unprepared or uncertain. Instead of being tossed about by life's difficulties, you will stand firm, secure in the knowledge that you have the resources to navigate whatever comes your way.

What could you accomplish with this mindset? The truth is that we often underestimate our potential, and believe ourselves to be much more limited than we really are. What's more, God's strength is best demonstrated when we come to the end of ourselves. It's often after we're completely spent that He swings wide the doors that refused to budge for our feeble strength. If your mission began by God's command, you can rest assured that the barriers are just waiting to fall down before you. The coming battles are not meant to stop, but to test you.

Everyone wants to know their purpose, but they make the mistake of looking to things like careers and opportunities to serve. Your purpose is to become like Jesus. The career, calling, vocation, service, etc. are simply vehicles God uses to take you to that destination. These things are assignments given to develop and test you. By engaging with them according to Biblical precepts, your character will gradually be molded into a vessel capable of carrying more and more Kingdom responsibility.

Many people make the mistake of pursuing tasks that were never assigned to them. They claim to do it in the name of the Lord, but to go where you were not called is disobedience. To proclaim you trust God enough to leap from the cliff is not faith. The devil tempted Jesus with this very situation, urging Him to cast Himself from the ledge, trusting that the angels would not allow harm to come to Him (Matthew 4:5-7).

But Jesus wisely pointed out that it was a sin to test the Lord in this way. To begin a journey without consulting God is bound to bring hardship. That being said, the first step is seeking an understanding of His will for your life. He may answer right away, or you may have to ask daily for months. Whatever you have to do, know that it's worth beginning correctly. It's worth waiting for. Once God gives you the green light on something, you know you can throw yourself into it wholeheartedly. Whatever your flaws and shortcomings, you now have the assurance of walking in the authority of the King.

Even so, it's easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of work before you. It's not uncommon to breeze through the first few challenges, only to be stopped dead in your tracks when the reality of your path starts to take shape. While it's normal to feel afraid, we also frequently underestimate our capacity to push through and overcome adversity. The issue isn't only about having more confidence though; it's also about recognizing and seizing opportunities we might otherwise dismiss by doubting our ability to handle them. Contrary to the cultural narrative, the real solution lies not in boosting our self-esteem, but by surrendering to God and allowing *Him* to build our trust. He will guide us through this process and pour out the grace we need to prosper. We are expected to work though. We don't learn anything when life is easy, and we tend to struggle with the sins of pride and pleasure when challenge is absent.

King Solomon, through the power of the Holy Spirit, detailed many instructions for living as a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. The book of Proverbs clearly lays out the blueprint for behavior that God recognizes as worthy of promotion. This requires a diligent commitment to consistent, reliable actions that demonstrate and increase our capabilities. By actively engaging in challenges and adventure, we learn what it truly means to walk with God. It's in the wilderness and the battle that He teaches us we can handle more than we thought, which expands our horizons and pushes us past prior limitations. More importantly, the struggle allows us to

relate more closely with Jesus' suffering. The real treasure lies not in material success, but in every step you take closer to the Faithful One.

A weak character results in excessive self-doubt. Knowing yourself to be flaky and unreliable, you won't trust yourself to take on challenges. Your unconscious mind recognizes the lack of integrity and will instinctively steer you away from situations it believes you're unable to manage. The enemy will reinforce this belief by trying to shift your focus from God, onto yourself. The problem is that the only way to build credibility is by facing the opportunities that challenge you, and growing to meet them.

Developing a strong character provides a solid foundation of confidence, which is the raw ingredient of true self-esteem. By cultivating the traits necessary to adapt and overcome, you begin to trust that, regardless of the situation, you're able to shoulder the responsibility. This trust significantly increases the likelihood that you'll say yes to new opportunities and helps you stay calm under pressure. Compare this to the belief that self-esteem comes from affirmations you don't believe, and insufferable self-flattery.

Modern culture fixates on self-expression without bothering to nurture qualities worth expressing. The result is a cacophony of voices crying out for attention, rarely with any substance. Everyone wants to be heard and feels entitled to an audience, yet few take the time to actually invest in the development of what they're sharing. Maybe the reason so many of us feel self-conscious is because we know we lack depth. If what we shared were genuinely valuable, rooted in reality and strong values, perhaps we wouldn't feel so exposed.

Self-confidence will come naturally as a result of work. However, this is a by-product, and not a goal. Your trust needs to be firmly rooted in the Lord of Hosts, as you on

Never make long-term decisions based on short-term emotions

Control is an illusion, but you are given free-will and expected to make the most of it. Along with the freedom to decide how we behave is the choice of how to interpret life. This is a blessing and a curse because it can be a powerful tool against the pressures of this world, but is also an opportunity for you to make terrible decisions out of ignorance, weakness, or stupidity. The ability to choose your perspective does not imply that all viewpoints are equal, or that reality is subjective. I'm simply pointing out that you have the power to decide what kind of attitude you live with. Don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not telling you to go "live your truth." Your truth is probably a mixture of someone else's opinion mixed with your own immoral desires. I'm also not saying you get to decide how reality is defined. Instead, I'm merely stating that if your perception of life is unproductive, you have the right to shift your focus from the negative to the positive, and that doing so will unlock hidden resources that would have otherwise remained unavailable.

You may not be able to change the situation itself, but your initial perception is often flawed anyway. This means there's a good chance that how you're seeing things is simply wrong. So if things look hopeless, it's quite possible that this is due to a lack of understanding on your part. Taking responsibility for how you view each circumstance opens the door to progress and empowerment.

I just know that someone is going to hear what they want to hear, and wildly misinterpret this whole section. It's important to talk about it though, so I'll just advise that you read on with wisdom and maturity.

You always get to choose how to interpret each situation. While there are truly unfair circumstances, I'm sure you at least know of people who overcame similar obstacles and managed to rise above. There is nothing new under the sun. The struggle you face is not unique. But understand that whatever you're going through, others have already found a way to prevail. This means you don't need to reinvent the wheel every time you encounter a problem. It also means that there's no real reason to stay stuck in a situation when you have access to the

information others used to escape. Study those individuals. Learn everything you can from them, and apply those lessons to your own journey.

You have to learn to take ownership of your perspective. Ten people can go through the same event and leave with ten completely different experiences. This isn't to diminish the pain you experience, but perspective is one of the few things you have any real power over. You influence how external factors affect you by where you choose to place attention. There are positives and negatives in everything. People often struggle to see the good in the bad, but have no issue finding the bad in the good. "Oh, it's a great relationship, but... This has been my dream job, but... it was a great vacation, but..."

You get the point. Focusing on the negative is a habit you can learn to break by deliberately seeking out and emphasizing the positives. Change the outer world by first changing the inner world. Your personality is largely the result of habit, meaning that a negative person doesn't have to stay that way, but they do have to determine to change. Choosing positivity is not a copout, but a decision to give energy to what's most productive.

When I first learned practical ways to battle depression, I was eager to share my discovery with a friend who was struggling with a similar issue. I enthusiastically recounted all the hacks and strategies I'd discovered over the preceding months, only to be met with a response that puzzled me. He said, "Yeah, but that only works for a while, then you get depressed again." The sad reality is that this is precisely how depression distorts your perception. When the emotional brain takes over, it clouds your judgment and insists that the current state is permanent, making it hard to believe in the effectiveness of any solution, or the possibility of lasting improvement.

Technically speaking, he wasn't wrong. If you stop applying the strategies that helped and revert to old patterns of thinking, it's no surprise that nothing changes. However, there's a flaw in this logic. By the same reasoning, you could argue that there's no point in taking a shower because you'll just get dirty again. Or that eating is pointless because you'll be hungry again tomorrow. Maintaining progress requires ongoing effort, just as staying clean and well-nourished demands regular attention. The key is to understand that continual practice is not an indication of futility, but that which sustains improvement and prevents relapse.

The reluctance to even try is a prime example of making decisions based on emotion rather than rational thought. While society often debates the roles of feelings and logic, character rarely features prominently in these discussions. The reality is that we are fundamentally emotional beings with some logical capacity. Every choice we make is inevitably influenced by our emotions. Contrary to what some might claim, no one makes purely logical decisions. Therefore, it's far more effective to learn to manage our emotions constructively rather than pretending we can (or should) eliminate this vital aspect of our nature. Understanding our emotional landscape, while cultivating a balanced approach to decision-making, is essential to personal development.

That being said, a strong character offers stability even amidst emotional turbulence. A person of virtue will still face the same temptations—fear, rage, lust, and pride—but they remain anchored by a consistent core. Their integrity provides a steady foundation, allowing them to navigate these storms with resilience and purpose.

Who you become is shaped by selecting the strategies you implement. Perfection isn't required, only *consistency*. Aim to be the kind of person who remains steadfast amidst life's storms, *persistently* rejecting negativity. Each moment of discomfort offers an opportunity for growth once you learn to recognize it, imbuing struggle with meaning. No matter how often you're knocked down, having a purpose makes the pain and suffering tolerable.

Growing up, I was always confused by the word “integrity.” When I asked my Mom what it meant, she quoted a saying commonly attributed to C.S. Lewis: “Integrity is what you do when no one is watching.” I'd like to expand on that now and say that “*character* is who you are when even *you* aren't watching.” It's something that plays itself out without conscious awareness. It's deeply rooted, and observable only through your behavioral patterns. It's the sum of your actions, thoughts, and values, visible through the consistent choices you make, even when you're not actively aware of them.

Character is built not by intentions, but through actions. It's the bedrock for doing what's right regardless of how you feel. Integrity implies strength and cohesion, so a person with integrity is stable, consistent, and reliable. Essentially, they can be trusted to remain steadfast

under pressure. As responsibilities accumulate, the weight doesn't produce cracks in their foundation. Instead, that character serves as a durable structure, capable of withstanding the test of time. It enables you to hold firm in the face of opposition and endure the onslaught of repeated failures and disappointment.

It's easy to claim that you'll work hard or treat others well, but do you live up to that promise consistently, despite fluctuating emotional states? For example, James 1:26 states: "If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless." I may say I follow Jesus, but if this is true, there will be evidence in the form of radical changes to the way I speak and act. Without this tangible progress, my professed values are merely empty platitudes. A strong character is demonstrated by an unwavering commitment to your values, even when it's inconvenient or difficult. This reliability not only earns respect, but also builds lasting trust.

Unfortunately, many people go wrong is by basing their decisions on emotions, which are fickle and easily manipulated. This trend is becoming increasingly evident in our culture today. With the rise of social media the celebrities we idolize have shifted from Hollywood stars to social media influencers. These figures often build their popularity on emotional and aesthetic appeal rather than substantive achievements. This creates a cycle where decisions are driven by transient feelings and superficial impressions, rather than enduring principles and integrity of character.

*Their idols are merely things of silver and gold,
shaped by human hands.
They have mouths but cannot speak,
and eyes but cannot see.
They have ears but cannot hear,
and noses but cannot smell.
They have hands but cannot feel,
and feet but cannot walk,*

*and throats but cannot make a sound.
And those who make idols are just like them,
as are all who trust in them.*

Psalm 115:4-8

You take on the qualities of that which you worship. You become what you give the most attention to. Those who fixate on the negative tend to find themselves surrounded by negativity. People who seek offense will find themselves perpetually angry and victimized. Similarly, those who obsess over influencers end up adopting superficial values and priorities. All of the content produced by such people is vain and impotent, and has resulted in a generation of artists who don't know what it means to bleed for their craft. While they may have some skill, their work is uninspiring and pointless.

We live in a culture driven by an insatiable hunger for content consumption. Each new idol lives behind the glass of a screen, and we devote every last drop of attention to our favorite personalities. This focus on *personality over character* shifts our priorities, making us more concerned with how we are perceived than with nurturing true virtue. We say we value individuality, but viewpoints are respected only if they align with the prevailing message of the media. The result is a shallow pursuit of approval, nailing shut the coffin of authenticity.

There's obviously value in learning from successful people but the problem lies in where we place our focus. We become what we give our attention to, yet we often don't even realize what we're truly fixated on. We think we're admiring our favorite personalities, but in reality, we're just staring at screens—absorbed, disconnected, and pacified. I'm not trying to pull a philosophical fast one on you, but consider what you're actually looking at. You think you're watching a person, but what you're really seeing is a carefully curated fragment of a persona. The issue isn't with your cracked phone screen—it's with the distorted perception designed to captivate and cause addiction.

While I'm not against making content, there's a serious issue in how we relate to one another and the beliefs we hold about our intrinsic value. We look at the surface level of a ten-second performance and feel like we should be able to emulate it. The ancients worshipped idols

of wood, stone, and metal—their gods were blind, and so too, were their followers *spiritually blinded*. Today, we idolize digital performances, which leads to superficiality in our values and interactions. Instead of fostering depth, we attempt to mimic fleeting glimpses of perceived perfection, judging our lives against deceptive standards.

We've become infatuated with entertainment. Personality entices us with excitement and unpredictability, whereas character offers stability and reliability. This bias is plainly revealed through our choices. We overlook red flags for the sake of attraction, promote smooth talkers, and prioritize our "quirks" and "uniqueness" over honesty and integrity. Our culture rewards charisma and style over substance, causing us to chase temporary thrills instead of building for Kingdom impact.

Just like constructing a house requires a solid foundation and quality materials, so does building a life. You wouldn't build a house on shaky ground or with faulty materials and expect it to stand the test of time. Yet many of us try to build our lives on unstable foundations like unresolved pain, resentment, or carnal desires. Conventional wisdom suggests using the pain of the past as fuel for motivation, or letting our dreams of future success drive us forward. At first glance, this seems powerful. Pain and desire can be strong motivators, igniting a sense of urgency and pushing us to take action.

But what happens when that pain begins to fade or the desires shift? What happens when you get what you want and realize you can't enjoy it because you've developed a dependency on suffering?

Building your life solely on these unstable feelings creates a cycle of perpetual seeking without satisfaction, because the foundation is never secure. Instead of laying a solid groundwork, you're stacking your life on emotional quicksand, which is liable to collapse when things get tough. In the long-term this can lead to burnout, anxiety, and a profound emptiness when you realize that the fulfilled desire is never enough, and the pain has merely solidified into a living tomb.

True motivation, like a well-built house, must come from something deeper and more enduring. Things such as principles, purpose, and character. Fortunately, God did not send you into this life without a purpose. He has wonderful plans for your life that reflect His heart and

His design for you. Just as a house needs a solid foundation to withstand storms, your motivation needs to be rooted in love for the Lord, not superficial desires. He has placed carefully chosen inclinations and gifts within you, each intended to impact the world in unique and beautiful ways. When your desires flow from closeness with His Heart, you find yourself beginning to see the world the way He does. This leads to an understanding that the only way to fully realize His plans for *your* life, is by using your assignment to serve *others*. This honors the Lord, because you are imitating His Son.

Compare this to what the secular world insists are appropriate sources of strength. Things like; pride, pain, anger, lust, selfish-ambition, greed, fear, etc. Every bit of motivational, self-help content out there tries to sell you on the lie that motivation is found solely as a means of moving away from pain, or towards pleasure. But relying on moving away from pain creates a cycle of action followed by regression. You get moving for a while until the pain subsides and you begin to run out of steam. This causes you to fall back to the level of discomfort that originally initiated action, so you make just enough progress to soothe the suffering but never enough to truly change.

Pursuing external motivators is like chasing after the wind. The things we want are often based on what others desire. Often what we seek is to be wanted, and we unconsciously assume that if we have the things others want, they'll want us as well.

But in this quest for approval, there is a danger in merely giving people what you think they want to see, causing you to become a sellout. But with a strong character, fueled by the impulses of God's Heart, your guiding values and principles remain steadfast and unaffected by the opinions of others. This allows you to operate in the domain of the material world without being dominated by its proclivity towards transient temptations.

The danger is that you aren't necessarily forced to address deep issues. Success in business doesn't guarantee you'll become a better person. It provides the opportunity for growth, but this development isn't automatic. Similarly, improving your writing skills doesn't guarantee honesty or self-awareness, especially if your primary motivation was always riches and fame.

The development of character must be intentional, because our natural tendency is in the opposite direction.

I urge you to delve deeper. What's the value of wealth if meaningful connections elude you? Is finding a great partner truly worthwhile if unresolved issues like rage and lust still lurk behind the scenes, ready to sabotage it all? Consider what materials you're using to build your life upon. For example, culture often encourages men to construct their lives on pain. Were you hurt in high school? Use that pain to drive your success. Were you betrayed by someone who valued appearance and wealth over deeper qualities? Let that fuel your pursuit of physical fitness and financial prosperity. It's often not until much later in life we learn that using things like resentment, bitterness, fear, lust, and greed as fuel, sets you on a path of self-destruction.

If you've worked in a government or corporate setting, you're familiar with the frustration of navigating a dysfunctional system. At the base of the hierarchy, you witness inefficiencies, redundancies, and arbitrary policies. Upper management often proposes bizarre solutions to non-existent problems and fixates on worthless metrics without clear rationale. While leadership insists they are prioritizing customer service and meeting needs, the reality you see is exploitation, manipulation, and deception, while employees endure mistreatment and dehumanization. Why does this happen? As the system expands, its inherent flaws are amplified, ultimately stemming from human errors in design. This is an excellent example of how the system you build will eventually magnify any inherent flaws as it grows.

That being said, while emotions make a poor master, they do serve important functions in our lives. They act as signposts, pointing us toward deeper issues and as motivators that compel us to act according to the situation. For example, anger is a miserable state to live in, but in a tense situation it may be the boost needed to overcome fear. The problem arises when we let such primal motivators reduce us to living like animals, slaves to our base impulses. We're not meant to "integrate our shadow-selves" but to rule over them. God gave us dominion over the earth and everything on it, including our own nature. Rather than integrating our shadow-selves we're called to master them, exercising control over all aspects of being, just as we are entrusted with dominion over the earth and its creatures.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

Genesis 1:26

That “our,” refers to the Son and Holy Spirit, the other two members of the Trinity. They are not separate beings, but rather are three in one. This is a great mystery, and beyond the scope of this book. However, let me draw your attention to the fact that the first thing God ever said about humans was an expression of His desire for our *likeness*.

How wonderful is it that we were created for unity with the Divine? You were made to look like God, and He still wants to mold you into His image despite all your flaws. But remember, you can’t get His results without His methods. I’d like to invite you to take a few moments with the Lord before moving on to the next chapter. This is a great opportunity to ask Him to purify your heart and change your desires; to teach you to love Him more deeply, and lead you in contemplation of His mystery.

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians

3:18

Embrace Character Arcs to Grow in Every Season

We know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Romans 5:3-4

Great stories take characters through a series of meaningful challenges that force them to reach past their limits and rise to the occasion. Your life mirrors this journey, and playing your part well with purposeful action will lead you through doors you can't even imagine yet. The way you respond to opportunities will determine the direction in which you move. Growth is always uncomfortable, but avoiding it is a slow death.

Think about how great stories unfold. Heroes never face off with the toughest challenge right away. The first step typically involves embarking on a journey from home just to reach the challenge. This journey meanders through unfamiliar terrain filled with danger, hardship, and adventure. In the process of surviving this journey, resilience and persistence are cultivated which ultimately equip the hero for a climactic ending.

Along the way friendships are formed, skills are learned, tools acquired, fears conquered, limitations surpassed, and character developed. The path often diverges unexpectedly into hair-raising detours. Nothing ever goes according to plan in a compelling story, and your journey will be no different. Your five-year plan will evolve as you do. Ideas will fail the reality test, and unforeseen circumstances will demand swift adaptation in order to navigate the relentless waves of trials and tribulations.

Rather than shirk this imposing path, learn to embrace the revolving door of adversity. Each wave of difficulty wears away at your weaker character traits like a river beating against a rock. While this constant tempering and testing will be uncomfortable, the pressure creates a clear distinction between what is superficial and what will endure. Nothing compares to this process. Until you put yourself in the game you won't experience the true self-discovery that only comes from engaging in the real world.

You can analyze your feelings forever without making progress, because truly understanding how you think comes from examining your decisions. I can speculate all day long about why I feel a certain way, but it's just that: speculation. It's much better to analyze data. Make decisions, experiment with actions, evaluate outcomes, and adjust behaviors accordingly.

People often fail to take action and then wonder why things don't improve. Character is forged in the furnace of adversity and it's crucial to view the problems in your life as a call to action. We often miss the invitation to adventure because it tends to feel uncomfortable rather than exciting. Big opportunities are accessible only to those willing to undertake the journey to get to them. In other words, the 'make it or break it' moments arrive only after we've allowed God's path to process and shape us.

We're so used to taking shortcuts and relying on technology that we've forgotten to fall in love with the journey. Instead of seeking true mastery, we try leapfrogging to anticipated moments only to find our skillsets and abilities lacking. You may dislike your current situation, but without persistence and discipline you won't be able to sustain the pursuit of anything better. You may feel stuck now, but if you don't learn the art of contentment in the present then nothing you accomplish will ever be enough.

The story unfolds with every step. By selecting a goal and moving towards it obstacles will arise, and how you respond to these challenges defines whether your character strengthens through resilience, or weakens through inaction. The enemies closing in around you will one day be a powerful testimony of how God delivered you from a hopeless situation. Just like a character in a story, you have the choice to rise or retreat. But with the Lord as your fortress, you are free to approach danger as adventure.

Small Action Leads to Big Results

While it's important to be intentional with your time and energy, embracing the organic adventures that arise can lead to unexpected breakthroughs and irreplaceable experiences. This isn't about trying to do everything all at once; it's about learning to say "yes" to the unexpected blessings that come disguised as inconveniences.

Some of your favorite memories will often be the ones you weren't looking for—spontaneous opportunities and unexpected interactions with others, for example. Gamers who spend their time on side quests may take longer to complete the mission, but they certainly get more for their money. Likewise, everyday life presents countless opportunities if you'll only take advantage of them. You'll have chances to meet new people, help strangers, share stories, and enrich what might otherwise become a stale and monotonous existence. You only get one life, so make every effort to milk it for all it's worth.

The way a novelist or scriptwriter will often produce growth is by creating situations that expose a character's shortcomings. By applying pressure to their weakest areas, characters are forced to either crumble or adapt. The added pressure magnifies any weak points. As readers, we may grow attached to certain characters but also feel frustrated with their flaws, just as we feel about the people around us. Watching the author highlight these points of friction and sand them down can be immensely satisfying, but when it's our own rough edges being worked on we often recoil in exasperation.

Of course, we rarely look at our own situations in the same light. We typically view those big moments of irritation as stressful events we just have to get through. This is unfortunate though, because those are the exact moments where we have the chance to redefine who we are. When we say we want to be more patient, we should recognize delays and waiting seasons as opportunities to cultivate that quality. If we want to be kinder and more forgiving, we shouldn't shy away from the disrespectful and obnoxious people in our lives (preaching to myself here). If we seek a deeper and more intimate relationship, we shouldn't disdain the challenges that arise—be it temptations, fights, insecurities, or obnoxiously long conversations. These are all

opportunities to rise to the occasion. The resistance we feel towards these scenarios exposes our own flaws. The discomfort is a sign of growth, and is always unpleasant, because it means the old version of you has to *die*.

By the way, we don't have to wait for major moments either. The big moments are hard. They bring a lot of stress and are often overwhelming. But your day-to-day is filled with opportunities for "micro-growth." This can look like biting your tongue when you want to engage in gossip or negativity, being diligent in tasks you don't enjoy, or refusing to cut corners and take shortcuts that would diminish the integrity of your work.

Many people have fallen for the lie that "living your best life" equates to hedonism; believing happiness to be found in the selfish pursuit of pleasure and positive emotions. We've told a whole generation to go after what they think is best, without first providing them with the tools to make sound decisions. As a result we've built a culture of immature individuals who don't understand themselves, lack the character to make good decisions, and have been empowered to follow the desires of a selfish heart filled with pain.

Living your best life doesn't mean following your heart. I've made the mistake of believing this too, but it's just not true. While pursuing curiosity can be positive, our hearts are often broken by pain, bound by selfishness, and twisted by unconscious desires we don't understand or recognize. Our hearts will guide us in the wrong direction every time. If you don't believe me just ask anyone who's struggled to leave an abusive relationship or break an addiction. Emotions are a beautiful and necessary thing, but need to operate within their proper framework or will become destructive.

Internal Conflict and Motivation:

Do it for the Plot

Since the stories we tell ourselves and the adventures we engage in are a crucial part of character formation, we need to explore the methods writers use to develop engaging plot lines and personalities. The pursuit of the main objective is the journey a hero embarks upon, but along the way various obstacles are faced. We often see themes that act as disruptions to the plan and cause internal conflicts with other characters. This disagreement often takes the form of friction caused by clashing personalities, inconsistencies in the main character's motivation, objectives, and personal flaws revealed in the crucible of the plot.

These character tropes are so interesting to us because they're relatable. The funny thing is though, when they happen to us we rarely see them as opportunities for fruitful growth but as inconveniences to be avoided or squashed. However, I'd like to present the idea that you can reinterpret these annoyances as potential gold mines. If a story is driven by the appearance and resolution of conflict, what might happen if you started looking at personal conflict in the same light?

Let's find out.

Writers often utilize conflict between characters to bring deeply rooted problems to the surface. Instead of allowing animosity to fester behind the scenes, situations are concocted to place a magnifying glass right over those negative patterns. This is easy to see in the context of a book or movie, but rarely do we think about our personal lives through this lens. It's true though. We all have strengths and weaknesses and often lean into our strengths while avoiding situations that challenge any less-developed qualities. While leveraging your strengths is wise, avoiding challenges will inevitably hinder a great deal of meaningful progress.

For example, a highly patient individual may find long hours of skillful practice to be enjoyable, but they might struggle with social interactions. Long-term success often hinges on interpersonal skills regardless of one's ambitions. Embracing opportunities for improving personability in daily interactions can be crucial for this type of person. This individual doesn't

have to aspire to becoming a great leader, but should still pour a certain level of energy into improving their social skills in order to utilize the power of teamwork efficiently.

Your story, your adventure, is already unfolding right in front of you. The minute you begin treating your mundane experiences as stepping stones, a new path comes into focus. Suddenly, that annoying co-worker becomes an opportunity to improve communication skills and practice patience. A lack of resources encourages innovation, and unexpected frustrations cultivate creativity and mental agility. The good news is, unlike in a movie, you don't need a mysterious stranger with a cryptic message or a mishap with radioactive waste to gain superpowers...

But if that's what you want, I do know a guy.

You're going to have to deal with these problems whether you want to or not right? If that's the case then you might as well get something out of them. How can you expect to solve big problems when you avoid the little ones? You'll have problems no matter what, so you'd better learn to leverage them! For instance, if you struggle with lust but aspire to be trustworthy and honorable in relationships, you don't need to wait until you're tempted by someone other than your partner to start practicing self-control. Actually, you shouldn't let things get to that point at all. You might like to think that you can play with fire and pull back at the last minute, but in reality, failing to snuff those bad habits early on prevents you from developing the strength needed to resist them after they've gained momentum.

In fact this is a huge reason why many people struggle with self-confidence, and much of my writing used to focus on addressing this issue. While popular culture suggests that building self-esteem is simply a matter of believing in oneself, reality tells us something different: "*you don't trust yourself to accomplish big things, because you haven't proven reliable with the little things.*" For instance, If you're lazy in your current job, it's hard to trust yourself enough to pursue a bigger, more challenging dream.

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.

Luke 16:10

You might overlook many opportunities right under your nose because they seem commonplace. But your unconscious mind constantly observes and relies on the decisions you make for guidance. Since the unconscious lacks the ability to discern rationally, it leaves that up to the conscious mind then works to reinforce those decisions. That's the beauty of our conscious/unconscious systems. Continuously thinking through and making decisions would consume an enormous amount of energy. To streamline this process, our unconscious automates repeated decisions, forming what we call 'habits.'

The problem is that we often view our decisions as relatively inconsequential and don't always take them seriously. Skipping the gym once may not seem like a big deal in the grand scheme of things, and oftentimes it really isn't. The issue arises when the unconscious sees us skipping a workout, and decides that this behavior must be what the conscious mind has decided is the best course of action. If we're not careful, this can very quickly become a habit.

It's difficult to convince someone they can achieve financial freedom when their habits lean towards procrastination, avoiding extra work, and not attending to their current finances with prudence. Quite simply, they don't trust themselves. Their unconscious looks at the road ahead and says; *"that's gonna be hard, and you don't work hard. It's gonna take time, and you've never been consistent with anything. There's gonna be a lot of pressure, and you avoid discomfort. So, no."*

We like to jump ahead and look for our big break, but without a solid foundation of character we lack the structural integrity to handle that pressure. You need to begin by making yourself accountable for the small things. Choose honesty when tempted otherwise. Opt out of negative thoughts, bite your tongue instead of letting it run wild. Decide what kind of person you want to be and stop making excuses when you fall short. Stop justifying your mistakes. You knew what you were doing when you made those decisions. No one is perfect, but that's not license to stay stuck forever. No you're not perfect, but you should be getting better.

Situations and conversations that expose your weaknesses can be profoundly therapeutic. While focusing on the little challenges is crucial, tackling significant issues is equally important. Imagine it like a rock tumbler—putting stones together with sand they rotate and vibrate,

smoothing out rough edges through friction. This is how it is to be a part of a community. We all have rough edges that need to be sanded down and encountering others' rough edges often initiates personal growth by refining our own. Choosing to gripe and complain about how annoying others are we're effectively making excuses to stay stuck. It's not to say people aren't frustrating or that they'll always want to grow alongside you, but you can choose to be offended or to let that pressure mold you. The decision is yours, but you have to go through it regardless.

Choose the Traits That Define You Wisely

Handling success gracefully requires a maturity that takes a long time to develop. In the narrative of personal growth, characters must learn to embrace their strengths while conquering weaknesses. Imagine following a hero through ten books only to find them exactly the same as when the story began—it would be totally unsatisfying! The journey should compel growth. If you find yourself stagnant in work or relationships, it may be a sign that you're not effectively leveraging the opportunities before you.

A novelist will concoct various situations in which the characters are forced to overcome adversity by pushing past their current state of thinking. Long hours of tedious practice temper the hot-headed impulsive, and produces patience. Egos must be set aside for team to function in dangerous environments, progressively challenging situations teach the protagonist new skills and increase his/her internal fortitude. Like a novelist crafting scenarios for characters to overcome, you too can engage with situations that push and expand your story beyond its current limits.

It's interesting to consider that in literature and film, we intuitively grasp the necessity of challenge and discomfort to make a story compelling. Stories of effortless triumph without meaningful struggle fail to resonate with us. We all cheer for the underdog because themes of overcoming adversity inspire us to become heroes in our own way as well. Witnessing an unlikely champion rise to the occasion inspires us to wonder if we could do the same.

Why is it that we're captivated by the stories of those thrust into adventurous circumstances yet often ignore the real opportunities in our own lives? Every day we encounter open doors that have the potential to catalyze profound life changes. Yet, we hesitate to walk through them, uncertain of the outcomes or daunted by discomfort. These opportunities beckon to us regularly, but our awareness may be lacking or our reluctance to embrace change holds us back. It makes you feel uneasy, sick to your stomach, nervous, out of place and unqualified. It's not that you should chase these feelings, but you need to learn to recognize them for what they

are. Many people turn back from moments loaded with potential simply because they've never learned to regulate their emotions and push through temporary pain.

Lazy people don't even cook the game they catch, but the diligent make use of everything they find.

Proverbs 12:27

This doesn't have to look a certain way, but don't mistake busyness for productivity. There are many self-help trends right now and the people caught up in them often look ridiculous. I've seen people put a ton of energy into morning routines and never take action on tangible business opportunities. What good is it to get up early and watch motivational videos if you never implement the ideas you've already had? What good does it do to journal about your feelings every morning if you don't actually break the cycles that caused your trauma in the first place?

If you view life as a barren wilderness that's exactly what you'll get from it. The reality however, is that you're surrounded by an abundance of opportunities that could supercharge your personal growth if you only took advantage of them. The problem is that these opportunities often come disguised as things we haven't been trained to recognize. They break the mold and fall outside of our programming.

There are two basic ideas when it comes to writing a good fiction story. One approach focuses on what authors call "world building." In world building, the writer spends a great deal of time setting the stage for the adventure. They develop the lore, cultures, geography, history and even languages that make up the backdrop. J.R.R Tolkien is a prime example of this. When you read his books, it's obvious you're stepping into a world that runs much deeper than the perspective of the narrator.

Authors who take this approach may spend years developing the setting in which their plot takes place before doing any real work on the story. But there's another style of writing that I personally prefer called "discovery writing." With discovery writing I may have a general idea

or objective to accomplish, but otherwise I'm just as much along for the ride as the reader. I'll start writing, and just sort of see what happens. It's a lot like playing pretend as a kid. You and your friends are just in the moment having a good time, making up crazy situations to get in and out of.

When I write content this is the same approach I use. I start with a general idea of what I want to convey but I'm often just as surprised as anyone else by what ends up on the page. Of course it all operates within the framework of the knowledge and experience I've developed. However, writing is thinking, and this process helps me to take seemingly unrelated pieces of information and discover new, creative ways to apply them.

There's something powerful about a writing habit that trains you to not only communicate ideas, but also to refine them. When you put a thought on paper its weaknesses become glaringly obvious. What seemed well-formed in your mind often looks immature and incomplete once it's laid out in black and white.

Since writing is thinking, it becomes difficult when your thoughts are unclear. You may have experienced trying to put your thoughts down on paper only to realize they're jumbled, confused, and fragmented. The reason isn't a *skill* issue; it's a *thinking* issue. Your writing reveals the state of your thoughts. When you can't connect ideas on paper it's because those thoughts are disconnected in your mind. They just don't seem this way to you because you have the benefit of an emotional charge that influences how they affect you.

The reason we're talking about this is because I want you to understand how it relates to the way you live. Once you understand how to "build your world" and pursue self-actualization within that space, you have the ability to begin crafting something amazing. I'm not going to say you can do whatever you want, because that's just not true. Life will never be what you expect and that's a good thing. What's cool about this though is that as you develop the ability to think critically and act upon meaningful ideas you begin the process of "discovery writing" in 3D space.

This perspective shift can make a great deal of difference. You can't control what happens to you but it is your responsibility to respond as effectively as possible. A practice of intentional thought and reflection can help you see things clearly even when life gets chaotic. No

one is perfect and you're never going to get everything right but what we're after is the habit of seeing things in the most beneficial way possible. This isn't about always being on cloud-nine and insisting that everything is wonderful all the time. If you want to do that and drive everyone around you insane, go for it. But what I'm getting at is for you to shift your perspective away from the idea that life is just *happening to you* and begin to realize the influence you have.

Shifting your perspective doesn't necessarily change the *external* world but it will change the *internal* one. The situation may not change, but your experience of it certainly does. Now you're no longer a victim, but the focus of a great origin story. Think about it; you likely have many situations in your life right now that cause stress, frustration, and discouragement. What could happen if instead of lamenting your circumstances you systematically trained yourself to approach each scenario with the intention of outgrowing the problem?

Suddenly, all those barriers become stepping stones. Perhaps you get fired from a job but you leave with strengthened internal fortitude. You become less afraid of conflict and more confident in your ability to manage difficult people. Replicate this process a few times, and you start recognizing opportunities that were previously invisible due to fear.

When you learn to recognize the remarkable in the ordinary it unlocks a hidden abundance of resources. Every day is suddenly filled with chances for you to develop and mature. If you are diligent in harvesting these hidden gems you may use them to purchase entry into new levels of experience and opportunity. God doesn't waste resources, and He doesn't make mistakes. Those who faithfully tend to the gardens they find themselves in are rewarded accordingly.

Start reflecting on the story you've been telling yourself. Imagine writing a novel with your current situation as the starting point. What actions would you have your character take to move them towards bigger and better things?

- What challenges are you currently facing?
- How can these situations aid in character development, preparing you for the next steps in your journey?

- What adventures have you been saying no to?
- What situations are you complaining about that could instead be seen as opportunities to temper your character, shore up weaknesses, and develop transferrable skills you can take with you to the next chapter?

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