

Recently I was asked to speak to the issue of teaching character to students at a Christian university. Now that's interesting, because not that many colleges are focused on personal character development ...mostly, in my observation of higher education institutions around the country, the community is often quite interested in condemning the character of those persons and groups and adversaries who disagree with them! No, that would be called character assassination. Now that we think about it, that kind of character assassination actually is the forging of character in the assassin, just in the wrong direction!

But, if we really *do* want to speak about character, then right off the bat we have a pretty formidable obstacle: just what *is* the definition of the word *character*? Modern usages of the word can be distorted, and a quick internet search can be unreliable, so I went to Webster's dictionary...the 1913 edition of Webster's often helps with a more timeless perspective. Well, 1913 Webster's provided several layers of complexity in its approach. So, I distilled their take into six dimensions of character. Here they are.

- First, the stamp impressed by nature, education, or habit
- Second, that which a person really is; nature; disposition
- Third, resolve, strength, independence
- Fourth, principles and motives that control the life of character
- Fifth, quality and conduct fulfilling office
- Sixth, reputation for truth and veracity

You see what I mean about looking at all those insightful dimensions at once? Layers. Complexity. Richness. But, at the street level, you and I still kind of consolidate that into a sense of what character is, right? We pretty much discover that one person's strong character is evident and clear, especially when we are on the receiving end of that strong character! And we pretty much discover that another person's weak character is evident and clear, especially when we are on the receiving end of that weak character!

But that evidence, those *circumstances*, those *events* where character is flushed out are merely the fruits—for better or for worse—of the actual forging of character, forging that happened previously, often the forging over a long period of time. That forging is the *root*. Seeing a person in action is the *fruit*.

So, how does good character get forged, especially for the Christian? Well, lots of folks have lots of ideas about that...you know, character is forged by parents or teachers or coaches. And I get that.

But I'm going to point to an entirely different foundation. And I'm going to let the cat out of the bag and disclose it right now. Then I'll build a case for that foundation.

So here it is. The Christian's strong character is forged by the Holy Spirit. Yes, that's right, the Person of the Holy Spirit forges the Christian's good character. Everyone else involved in the maturing Christian's life of character building is secondary. Period. Intrigued? So, here we go, first going to three Scriptures found in the gospel of John, chapter 14.

- "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" (John 14:6 ESV)
- "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you." (John 14:16-17 ESV)
- "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, *he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*" (John 14:26 ESV) *emphasis mine*

There we have it. The Holy Spirit, our Helper...our Counselor...our Advocate Who the Father gives to us and dwells in us, well, the Spirit teaches us *all things*. Yes, He teaches all—no limits—including character!

And there's a three-fold depth of our Source here, the Holy Spirit, for teaching us character—the Spirit is *unfiltered*, *infallible*, and *unceasing* in His handling of our development. That's right: unfiltered, infallible, and unceasing. That's why His development of our character is so powerful. Let's unpack those three.

First, *unfiltered*. Unlike when we deal with mentors or disciplers and we often cloak our deepest issues, the Holy Spirit knows us perfectly and addresses *all* those issues. He is our *Helper*. Second, *infallible*. Unlike human advisers and mentors who only see partially into our souls and counsel accordingly, the Holy Spirit infallibly directs each teachable believer's steps and, in so doing, forges character. He is our *Counselor*. Third, *unceasing*. Unlike human mentors or disciplers who can only be with us in fractional time segments, the Holy Spirit dwells in us 24/7, working nonstop, in good times and bad, our *Advocate*. Yes...unfiltered, infallible, unceasing! He is our unfiltered Helper, our infallible Counselor, our unceasing Advocate.

Yes, the Spirit *is* primary and foundational for forging *Christians'* character. Remember, John 14 says the world does not know Him! So, the outcome of the Holy Spirit's work is distinctly Christian...Cross-centric, gospel-centric, grace-centric...if we cultivate Him doing His unfiltered, infallible, unceasing work in us.

Then, every other source for character-building is secondary! Parents, pastors, teachers, mentors, disciplers—all secondary to the Holy Spirit! Each important? Of course! In fact, to the striving Christian, the Holy Spirit will affirm on-target human counsel. But the Holy Spirit will also reveal false teaching or inappropriate human counsel—that's one way He teaches all things in our own spirit: affirming good human counsel and denying bad human counsel. Amazing dimensions of the Spirit forging character!

Next, this is the fascinating verse that soon follows those verses where Jesus taught about the Holy Spirit. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." (John 15:5-6 ESV) What an amazing verse! Character in the Christian walk is not a list of behaviors. It is a rich dwelling. Walking with Christ and being shaped by Him. Abiding in Christ through the Holy Spirit—the key to Christian character.

But let's go even deeper. Just how do we *specifically* abide in Christ? Well, first and foundationally, we abide in the Word of God by studying it, becoming saturated in the Truth. Then, we surrender to the power of the Holy Spirit Who dwells in us! The Holy Spirit, as our verse said moments ago, brings remembrance of everything that Jesus...the Word...has taught us. And, further, the Spirit teaches us *all* things! In this way, in circumstances good or bad, the Spirit develops the believer—forging character!

To be sure, for this elevated life, we must cultivate the Holy Spirit in our everyday lives. The result can be vivid, according to Webster's 1913 multiple definitions of character that we started with. The stamp impressed by Holy Spirit education. Disposition. Resolve. Strength. Independence. Principles. Quality and conduct in fulfilling our roles. All accomplished through the Source Who is unfiltered, infallible, unceasing!

This. Is. Forging. Character. The best way. Available only to the Christian—because the Holy Spirit dwells only in believers. So, to actively abide in Christ by the power of the Spirit?—What a stunning privilege!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Have you developed an abiding in Jesus that most fully allows the Holy Spirit to in turn most fully bring just the ideal remembrances to you? Elaborate.
2. Reflect upon one instance where the Holy Spirit clearly spoke to the right answer to your circumstances—where the godly choice became clear—and that developed your character. How do you cultivate your relationship with the Holy Spirit to make that character development more common, even routine?
3. You are surely a discipler, a mentor, a teacher...a believer appointed to impact someone more deeply for Christ. How have these Bible verses in John 14 and 15 improved or edified or reconstituted your understanding of how to better perform that role? Be specific.