

Active and Growing...Good Character!

Romans 5:1-5

January 13, 2019

I have some startling news to share with you today as your Pastor.

I have decided that I would like every member and potential member of this community of faith to submit in 2 weeks a character reference statement. This character reference form must be filled out by 3 friends you have known for at least 1 year, two family members, yourself...and oh yeah, get God to provide His input on your character reference!

Of course this character reference form will not be enforced. But what if you decided to follow up on this idea? What do you think your friends, family, yourself and God would say about you...your character? What would you like to think they would say about your character?

What are some character attributes that you would use to describe someone who has a good character?

As we continue our look at being "Active and Growing" in 2019 we come to this character reference focus. We are called on to complement our basic faith with...good character. (II Peter 1:5)

So what would a "good character" reference look like? What would a good character reference sound like from God?

There was a guy in the bible who lived in a sinful society. The culture was evil. It was so evil that God, Himself, was disgusted with the people...it broke His heart. He was ready to wipe all of humanity off the earth. He could not give a good character reference for anyone, except this one person. He was different. God liked what He saw in this person. (Genesis 6:5-9)

This person was Noah!

I want to share with you God's character reference of Noah! God wrote:

"Noah was a good man, a man of integrity in his community.

Noah walked with God." (Genesis 6:9 Message bible)

I don't know about you but I wouldn't mind one bit if God were to write that about me on my character reference form. But it seems so difficult to live up to Noah's character level.

Noah faced two floods. Most of us are quite familiar with the flood of water and the story of him building the ark with all the animals on that floating zoo.

But there was a flood Noah faced before the water flood.

It was the flood of evil in the culture he lived. This is important for us to recognize because it was in this first flood that Noah's character was built. It was also during the years it took him to build the ark that his character was built while others ridiculed his God-given project. It was in the first flood of evil that his faith was active and growing...his good character was built.

Noah remained a good man in the face of the temptations of the evil around him.

Noah maintained his integrity in his family and community...he was someone people trusted and looked to as one with values. Noah stayed active and grew in his faith as he walked with God daily in all of his struggles of living in an evil culture.

There is a character reference we all would desire to have God write on our character reference form. Could He for you?

Now before you go and give up on that happening we need to understand that Noah didn't get this character reference from God overnight. To say Noah was a good man of integrity who walked close to God doesn't mean he was perfect.

If you read on about Noah after the flood you discover this to be true. (Genesis 9:20) He was not perfect. But he sought to keep his faith active and growing in his good character.

It means that Noah, during the evil flood, wholeheartedly loved and obeyed God. He sought to walk step by step in faith in God. He was an example of obedience to God for his community...the people he knew and associated with on a daily basis.

Noah's good character developed before the ark project. Noah's good character developed in the storms, struggles, stresses, disappointments and pain of the evil flood of his day and time. Noah got the ark building job because of his good character. His good character was built in the struggles of daily life!

How do we get a good character reference from God?

The answer is not an easy one for us to hear, much less implement in our daily lives.

The Apostle Paul was someone who developed a good character. God used him to build churches during the persecuting times of the Early Christian church. Here is what he shared about how to develop a Christ-like character:

"And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us..." (Romans 5:2-5 NIV)

Not sure that's what we wanted to discover on how we can develop "good character" in our active and growing faith in Jesus. That word, "character" that is used here comes from the word that was used to describe metal that was passed through a hot fire to burn off any impurities. Passing the metal through the fire made the metal stronger and purer.

Can you feel the heat? Do we want to feel the heat?

If we desire that good character reference from God we are to trust Him to guide our lives to make us stronger and purer. This good character will not come to us in the easy goings of life. We have no problem rejoicing in the hopes...the easy and good times of life. It is easy to obey God when what He guides us to do is something we were planning to do or enjoy doing.

But what about when the heat gets turned up with struggles, pains and disappointments. Do we still find ourselves rejoicing?

Paul lived in a time when the 1st Century Christians were experiencing a lot of persecution for their faith in Jesus. The Roman government was not user friendly to the followers of Jesus. Suffering was the rule instead of the exception. Paul encouraged the Christians to persevere in their sufferings and difficulties knowing that their character would become strong and pleasing to God.

When you look at your 2019 calendar, it doesn't post for you what difficulties, struggles, pains and disappointments to expect in the days ahead.

James, one of Jesus' disciples, would write to the early Christians that it was not IF they would experience the struggles, but WHEN they experience the struggles and trials to profit from them. (James 1:2-4) He wasn't expecting them to go around with a "happy face" as they walked through the dark valleys of struggle. He did encourage them to stay active and growing in their faith with a positive assurance that God would see them through.

We are to "rejoice in our suffering" not because we like pain or deny it's tragedy it can cause in our lives; but because we trust and believe that God will use life's struggles, difficulties, and Satan's attacks and lies to build our character.

In our times of struggle we trust God's promise that He can cause all things to work for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Our good character strengthens when we keep our faith active and growing and obedient to God's truth.

In our times of dark valleys, we pray the psalmist prayer of trust, ***"Even when the way goes through Death Valley (the dark valley of death), I'm not afraid when you walk by my side." (Psalm 23:4 Message bible)***

In other words, when the flood of struggles and dark moments come we trust God is with us each step of the way. We steady walk with God through the traumatic stresses with an active faith.

We are familiar with PTSD...post traumatic stress disorder. I read an interesting article the other day about PTST...post traumatic stress transformation. People can go through similar tragedies and one will suffer a disorder and another a transformation or growth in their character. The study concluded that often the one who developed the growth or transformation in the turmoil was one who had a spiritual foundation.

Helen Keller, someone who knew and lived with such enthusiasm for life, while blind, deaf and mute communicated this great observation about a person's character:

"Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired and success achieved.

All the world is full of suffering.

It is also full of overcoming." ---Helen Keller

In the darkness of her life Ms. Keller saw strength of character and hope!

We desire that good character reference from God. Are we willing to go through the fire of struggle, pain and suffering to be able to rejoice?

We have no problem rejoicing in hope.

Can we rejoice in our suffering?

How bad do we desire that good character reference from God?

When the dark nights of struggle, stressors, persecution, tragedy come we often question God. We ask, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this?"

The question we might want to consider asking instead is, "What are you wanting me to learn from this? How will You use this to build my good character?"

The disciple Peter reminded us that difficulties will not last forever...they are only for a season of our lives. (I Peter 1:6)

They are to be used for God's glory. (I Peter 1:7)

We can be assured that we will confront trouble, evil and testing of our faith in Jesus. It won't last forever. God's power is still at work. God's hope is still active and available to build good character in those who seek Him.

Jesus gets it. He went through the dark valleys of trials, testings, persecution and pain. Here are His encouraging words to us:

"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. Not only that---count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens---give a cheer, even!" (Matthew 5:10-12 Message bible)

When was the last time you were persecuted for your faith, values or truths you build your life upon? Did you give a cheer? It amazes me how strong and bold the Christian brothers and sisters are in countries where their lives are threatened because of their faith in Jesus. God sees their good character.

We have such freedom from that kind of persecution. I wonder if that is a good thing? How much have we been active and growing in our good character? Would God give us that kind of good character reference?

I do want to challenge us to take time this week to fill out that character reference form. What do you honestly believe God would see in you? As we walk into 2019, unsure of what awaits us, we can walk assured that God is with us. Prayerfully allow the struggles to produce that "good character" God seeks in each of us.

When the struggles come may we prayerfully remember God's good character building promise and **"shout the praise even when we are cornered by the troubles, because we know that troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue (good character), keeping us alert for whatever God will do next."** (Romans 5:3-4 Message bible)

"Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received!...So don't lose a minute in building on what you've been given, complementing your basic faith with good character..." (II Peter 1:3, 5 Message bible)

As you and I daily walk side by side with God may our good character be developed to where God will write on our character reference form that we are a good person, a person of integrity in our community, someone who walks with Him each step of each day!

Then be ready for the "ark building project" He may have for you to build!