

The Power of Character



By Dr John Parankimali, PhD

It is often said that when wealth is lost, nothing is lost; when health is lost, something is lost; but when character is lost, everything is lost. Character is the sum total of a person's values, beliefs and personality. It is the awareness of what is right and appropriate in one's role, one's behaviour, and one's relationships.

Character is vital to building strong personalities. Our actions and our reactions define our character. It is not the polls or public opinions but the character of the leader that determines the course of history. There is no twilight zone in integrity. The road to success has many pitfalls. It takes a lot of character and effort not to fall into them. It also takes character not to be disheartened by critics.

Nathaniel Hawthorne said this once, "No man can for any considerable time wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which is the true one."

No number of titles, degrees, designations, awards, licenses, or other credentials can substitute for basic, honest integrity. The need for integrity today is perhaps as great as it has ever been. And it is absolutely essential for anyone who desires to become a person of influence.

A pompous young man lost his silk handkerchief and accused his neighbour of stealing it. After some confusion, the man found the handkerchief in his own pocket and apologised for having accused his neighbour. "Never mind at all," said the latter. "You thought I was a thief and I thought you were a gentleman, and we were both mistaken."

A man can never be a true gentleman in manners until he is a true gentleman at heart. To be considered a gentleman, you need to speak gently and kindly, have an attractive and magnetic personality, refrain from evil, be unselfish and always be ready to serve, slow to judge and quick to forgive.

There's a story is told of a man who was looking for a job, a man with bulging muscles. He was a body builder by training, but out of work. He saw an advertisement - 'wanted men to work at zoo'. When he went in there in search of the job, to his utter horror he found that the only job left there was to play the part of a monkey because they had ran out off monkeys and they wanted someone to impersonate one because children were coming in the next few days. Since money was tight and this man decided to take the job. He had to arrive before sunrise and put on the outfit of a monkey, slip in the darkness

and get into his cage. When the day dawned and the children came in, all he had to do was to face the floor, look rather adept at swinging between the branches and eat the peanuts and bananas whenever they were fed to him. Now you can do that for about eight or ten hours and after that he got thoroughly exhausted and while he was swinging between the branches rather nauseated, he slipped and fell into the lion's den, next door and he shouted, "Help, Help". And the lion leaned over and said, "If you don't shut up we will both lose our jobs."

No number of titles, degrees, designations, awards, licenses, or other credentials can substitute for basic, honest integrity. The need for integrity today is perhaps as great as it has ever been. And it is absolutely essential for anyone who desires to become a person of influence. A pompous young man lost his silk handkerchief and accused his neighbour of stealing it. After some confusion, the man found the handkerchief in his own pocket and apologised for having accused his neighbour. 'Never mind at all,' said the latter. 'You thought I was a thief and I thought you were a gentleman, and we were both mistaken'

This may be a strange story but the fact of the matter is that a man carries on this game of pretence into very many arenas of his life. He is attempting to build civilization when he doesn't know what it means to be civilized, he is trying to be a philosopher when he doesn't know who the master philosopher is, he is portraying his artistic perception when he does not know who is master artist is, he moralizes on life when he doesn't know the moral law giver. In his lostness and desperation he cries out - help, help only to find that the man he is shouting to, is playing the same game as he is. G.K. Chesterton looking at a series of articles on what is wrong with the world, he sent back the shortest letter to the editor which the editor had to read three times to understand. "Dear sir, regarding your article what is wrong with the world, "I am", yours truly, G.K. Chesterton. I am wrong with the world, that's what's wrong with the world. The modern man has exalted himself. He is in a dangerous position because he thinks that the world is revolving around him. The ego is glorified to the maximum extent possible. He thinks he is indispensable and he is not aware that he is on the way to ruin.

The Great Wall of China has been described as "the largest fortification ever built". It is reputedly the only man-made structure that is visible from the moon.

The cost of building the wall was staggering. Dating from the 4th century B.C. it was substantially rebuilt in the 15th and 16th centuries. The purpose of the wall was to defend China against attacks from the north. It was believed that with an average height of about eight metres and a thickness of between three and four metres no enemy would be able to penetrate it. So, when it was finished, the people relaxed. They thought it was impregnable. But their enemies breached it easily. How? They simply bribed one of the gatekeepers. Clearly, fortifications without integrity will count for little.

You may be born into rich families, you may have excellent qualifications, you may occupy positions of importance, but until and unless you are persons of integrity, these things count little. People like Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi and Aung San Suu Kyi are respected and honoured for their strong character which enabled them to fight all odds, make many sacrifices and devote their lives for the good of humanity.

Twelve-year-old Tommy's father was once over-speeding when a speed patrol stopped him. But his father was unruffled. He pulled out a 50-rupee note and handed it to the policeman. The policeman smiled and allowed him to go. To Tommy who was beside him and who had noticed everything that had transpired, his father

said: "Tommy, everybody does it you know!"

On another occasion, Tommy accompanied his mom to a cosmetic shop. There the accountant at the cash counter handed her some extra money while paying off the balance. She quietly slipped the extra money into her handbag. She then turned to her son and said: "Tommy, everybody does it, you know!"

Then Tommy was caught copying in the examination. His parents were called and were briefed about Tommy's misconduct. The parents were appalled and reprimanded their son. "Tommy, we never expected you to be so dishonest. You bring disgrace to our family". "Dad! Mum! Everybody does it, you know!"

As the tree is bent, so it will grow. And today kids can look all around at so many bent adults that they can hardly guess what it means to be straight. People basking in the spotlight - and I don't mean just politicians - are forever presenting terrible examples to the children of the world. In the words of John Wooden, "Ability may get you to the top, but it takes character to keep

you there." William Arthur Ward said, "Character is always lost when a high ideal is sacrificed on the altars of conformity and popularity." (*The writer is the executive director of Don Bosco Institute, Guwahati*)