Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Character Crisis
Scripture: Psalm 119:105; Romans 1:21-32; 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22;
Code: A266

Society has suffered terrible decay as the love of iniquity has trumped noble character. Sadly, what Western culture once regarded as virtuous and good has become almost unrecognizable. Take a few minutes to consider the importance of character, find its source, and commit yourself to the quest—the quest for character.

Character. It has an old-fashioned sound to it, like a faded relic of the Victorian era. We live in a materialistic culture where prestige, prosperity, and popularity are valued more than genuine integrity. In fact personal character hardly seems to matter very much at all nowadays—at least in the realms of mass media, entertainment, politics, and pop culture.

Only a few select moral qualities are still prized by society at large. They are chiefly liberal community values such as diversity, tolerance, and broad-mindedness. Sometimes they are even called virtues. But when traits like those are blended with hypocrisy or employed to justify some other iniquity, they become mere caricatures of authentic virtue.

Meanwhile, genuine individual virtue—the stuff of which true, timeless, praiseworthy character is made—has been formally relegated to the sphere of “personal” things best not talked about openly. These days, even an elected national leader’s personal character is supposed to be treated as a wholly private matter.

As a result, our society’s most prominent celebrities include countless people who actually are known best for gigantic character flaws. Notice, for example, the people who usually grace the covers of celebrity magazines. Very few are decent role models. Often they are actually people who exemplify the worst kinds of character traits. No morally sane, thinking parents would ever hope for their own children to emulate the lifestyles or embrace the values of most of our society’s best-known figures. Big personalities are highly revered anyway, because celebrity itself counts more than character in a society without any moral anchor.

In fact, over the past few decades so many famous people in our society have been charged with serious crimes that a cable television series is devoted exclusively to covering stories about the legal problems of some of our culture’s favorite figures. Still, both the public and the media continue to confer celebrity status on more and more bizarre characters.

How have we come to this? The greatest cultures throughout human history have always reserved the highest positions of eminence and respect for true heroes—people who distinguish themselves by great self-sacrifice, moral excellence, or some truly great accomplishment. They only societies that confer celebrity status on immoral and villainous people have been cultures in serious decline and on the precipice of utter ruin.

One of the universally understood rules of thumb that governed western society until a few short decades ago was that people who achieved fame had a duty to be wholesome role models. Even men and women who weren't really of sterling virtue in private sought to keep their character flaws hidden from the public—because if their moral defects became known, they lost their star status. Political figures could not remain in office if they were found culpable for any scandalous moral indiscretion.

That is no longer the case. Today's celebrities proudly flaunt their decadence. With the rise of a massive entertainment industry in the second half of the twentieth century, celebrity became a cheap and shallow commodity. Honest character is now seen as totally optional—or worse, hopelessly unfashionable. As a matter of fact, in certain segments of today's entertainment and music industries, authentic virtue would be practically incompatible with fame and success. Some of the best-known figures in the recording industry, for example, are avowed gangsters who openly glorify evil in their lyrics. It is frightening to contemplate the future of a society where so many people so badly lacking in character can attain celebrity status so easily—and often hang onto their fame and influence no matter what crimes they commit.

The Bible says that is exactly what happens when a society rejects God and thereby incurs His righteous judgment. Romans 1:21-32 describes the downward path of a culture abandoned to sin. Take note of the roster of evils that finally overwhelm every fallen society. The list closely resembles everything currently fashionable in the world of entertainment and celebrity:

Even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:28-32)

That describes our culture to the letter, doesn't it? People today literally entertain themselves with iniquity, heedlessly applauding those who sin most flagrantly. Society today makes celebrities of people who in our grandparents' generation would have been deemed the most contemptible rogues.

Almost everything that used to be considered shameful is now celebrated. We therefore live in a culture where personal character and individual virtue are rapidly evaporating at almost every level. Virtue and infamy have traded places.

According to the Bible, God designed us to be men and women of exemplary character. He repeatedly commands us to pursue what is virtuous and shun what is evil. From cover to cover in Scripture, iniquity is condemned and virtue is exalted.

Clearly, we are supposed to be men and women of excellent character. We're commanded to "hold fast what is good [and] abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

But where do we go to learn how to do that? Popular culture will not point the way for us. Scripture alone is a reliable lamp for our feet and light for our path (Psalm 119:105). God's Word points the way in the quest for character.

The Bible contains numerous lists of positive character qualities. Second Peter 1:5-8, for example, gives a catalogue of virtues and urges us to add to our faith. The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, the qualities of authentic love in 1 Corinthians 13, and the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 all list similar traits that describe true excellence of character.

Truly excellent character is actually a reflection of the moral nature of God Himself. For that reason, all virtues are interdependent and closely related. And all of them are the fruit of God's grace. As you study biblical virtue, may you perceive the true beauty of Christ's character and desire to see it reproduced in your own life.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2016 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).