**CHARACTER FORMATION**

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*“become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”*

*(Eph 4:13)*

**Objective**

To understand divine nature and need to grow in the image of Christ.

**Introduction**

The purpose of God’s calling for us is to make us like Christ, to be conformed in the image of his Son. The good work God is doing in all things for us during our life on earth is restoring us in his image so that we may grow in Christ’s character.

**Why Should A Disciple Grow In The Character Of Jesus?**

**Definition of “Character**”

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word “*hayil*” is used to refer to “virtue” of godly women. In the New Testament, three Greek words, “*eugenes*” (Ac 17:11, noble-minded), “*docume*” (Ro 5:4, approved, tried character), and “*ethos”* (1Co 15:33, moral habits and manners), were used to refer to noble moral character.

Character is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as (1) “one of the attributes or features that make up and distinguish an individual”; (2) “the complex of mental and ethical traits marking and often individualizing a person, group, or nation.”

Humans were created by God in His image (Ge 1:26). Thus all humans inherited the spiritual and moral character of God. From God, humans inherited good characters like goodness, love, mercy, patience, righteousness and justice. Due to sin, however, the image of God in humans is severely marred, so all humans are born with the good characters inherited from God greatly weakened or damaged.

But character can be nourished and built up. The lessons learned from mistakes often provide a powerful impact on growth in character. The proper response to character failure is 1 John 1:9, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*

**It Is God’s Will to Make Us Christ-like.**

Philippians 1:6 says, “... *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”*

The purpose of God’s calling for us is to make us like Christ, to be conformed in the image of his Son. The good work God is doing in all things for us during our life on earth is restoring us in his image so that we may grow in Christ’s character.

What is Jesus’ character? Jesus said, *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Mt 5:48). Here the word “perfect” (*teleios*) denotes those who have attained the full development of maturity in divine attributes, especially in love. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being (Heb 1:3). These are the divine character manifested through the words and deeds of the perfect man, Jesus Christ:

* Love
* Gentleness and humility
* Compassion
* Truthfulness
* Faithfulness
* Patience
* Obedience
* Sacrifice

Christ-like character is the ultimate goal of Christian life. We are to *“become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13)*.

Forming Christ-like character should be the ultimate goal of Christian education and discipleship. Apostle Paul told Timothy, *“The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith” (1Ti 1:5).*

Galatians 5:22-23 enumerates nine Christ-like character traits: *“but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* The Holy Spirit not only testifies about Christ by helping us to know the truth in Christ’s words, but also helps us to build up Christ-like character in us.

Character is never built in a classroom. Character is built in the circumstances of life. When we understand how God used circumstances to develop character, we are able to respond correctly when God places us in character-building opportunities. God builds character in our lives by allowing us to experience situations where we are tempted to do the exact opposite of the character quality.

Character is not just having integrity or honesty, it is a living, growing relationship in Christ which produces the fruits of the Spirit. Authentic Christian character is formed by our commitment to Christ. When we surrender to Christ, we allow His piercing work to grow and enrich us through the Spirit.

We are the windows through which people can see Christ. Lacking the image of Christ is destructive to the body of Christ and the reputation of our Lord. This is another reason why we should grow in Christ’s image.

**Recognizing The Need To Grow**

Grow in the awareness of God and of oneself in light of God’s holiness (Lk 5:8; Isa 6:5). Areas in which a disciple should grow.

**Introduction**

Luke 5:8: When Peter saw God in Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, he felt God's presence through Jesus' power and love and could not but confess that he was a sinful man. Because of this life transforming event, he could grow in the awareness of God and began to live as a disciple of Jesus in light of God's holiness.

Isaiah 6:5: Isaiah also experienced the awareness of God through hearing the voice of God directly and began to dedicate his entire life as the messenger of God in light of God's holiness in his own generation.

**Grow in the Awareness of God**

1) The disciples should grow in the awareness of God to form Christ-like-character. The awareness of God is the beginning of a truth that has the power to radically transform our life. Our heart may be enlightened by the Spirit of wisdom and revelation as we think about our character growth in the awareness of God as a disciple of Jesus.

2) God has a general desire to be close to human beings. God's presence is promised to believers (Mt 28:20) and unbelievers alike (Ac 17:27). But we, the disciples of Jesus, are much more likely to experience God's clear presence. We need to move from unrecognized presence to a never ceasing awareness that God is with us in an immediate and deeply personal way.

3) With our sensitivity for God's nearness, our experience of God grows (Ps 145:18).We need revelation of God's presence in our lives, not only in general but also in particular situations. In order to live in constant awareness of God's presence, it's not enough to know that God is with us but also how God is with us and what God is doing.

Psalm 145:18 “*The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.”*

The Bible reveals those important values of God's immediate presence in several ways.

* God is always right next to us (Ps 34:18).
* God is gazing at me with pleasure (Ps 34:14)
* God isseeking me with jealousy (Deut 4:24).
* God is not passive (Heb 11:6).

**Grow in the Awareness of Oneself in Light of God’s Holiness.**

How can we practically connect with the truth of God's immediate presence in our practical Christian life?

* Spend more time in our personal meditation through Bible reading and prayer.
  + Psalm 104:34 *“May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the Lord.”*
* Always remind ourselves that God is with us.
  + Psalm 18:2 *“The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”*
* The effects of Christian living as a disciple that come from living before God.
* When God is with us here and now, we will be concerned about several things.

## When God is near us, we will be concerned about our actions and live a holy life.

## When God is at our side now, we will be concerned about our sins.

## When God is with us here and now, we will be concerned about our fear.

**How Can We Grow In Jesus’ Character?**

**What Does ‘Grow in Jesus’ Character’ Mean?**

1. Growing in Jesus’ character means ‘being like him (Christ)’ or ‘being Christ-like.’
2. Growing in Jesus’ character means the change of an inner self.
3. Growing in Jesus’ character means that we bear fruits of the Holy Spirit in Christ.

**How Can We Grow in Jesus’ Character As His Disciples?**

The process of becoming like Christ from the perspective of a UBF discipleship program.

We can grow in Jesus’ character by studying his word. Jesus is the Word. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God (Jn 1:1). When we study his word, we know who Jesus is, how he lived, and what he taught. The word of Jesus teaches us not only the way of our eternal life, but also of our spiritual growth. The word of God makes us wise for our salvation and disciplines us to be useful servants of God.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*.”

We believe that the Bible is the word of the living God. We believe its authenticity and absolute authority as the truth of God. One of the unique characteristics of UBF Bible study is one-to-one. Their personal relationship is not only conveying or sharing Bible knowledge, but also establishing a trust and love relationship between a teacher and a student. We call this “shepherd and sheep relationship.” But, there is danger of misuse and misinterpretation of the Bible caused by limitation of teacher’s Bible knowledge and spiritual immaturity

The word of God enables Christians to take deep root in Jesus. Colossians 2:6-7 says, “*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness*.” In order to take root in the word of Jesus, UBF Bible teachers recommend their students to write testimony or reflection (‘sogam*’*) after their Bible study. The word of God purifies our heart and grows us into God’s divine nature and character. Jesus said to his disciples in John 15:3, “*You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you*.” Jesus prayed for his disciples in John 17:17, “*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth*.”

UBF Bible study provides students with opportunities to grow as Bible speakers, messengers, ministers, and future missionaries. Through messenger training students also learn how to depend on God through prayer. Those who are disciplined as messengers grow as independent messengers who pray and dig out the word of God anytime, anywhere and for anyone. UBF provides Daily Bread so that disciples may eat the word of God daily for their daily walk with Christ and for their spiritual growth (Mt 4:4; Mk 1:35).

We can grow in Jesus’ character by obeying his word**.** Even though Jesus is God in very nature, he humbled himself and became obedient to death- even death on the cross. Jesus struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane in order to obey the Father’s will (Mt 26:39; Mk 14:36; Lk 22:42). Hebrews 5:8 says, “*Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered….*” Jesus said in Luke 9:23, “*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me*.” Being the disciple of Jesus is denying ourselves and following Jesus daily. When we obey the word of God, we share Jesus’ divine character. When we obey the word of God, our sinful desire is curbed and our hearts are governed by the Holy Spirit (Ro 8:6).

When Jesus’ disciples obeyed Jesus’ Great Commission, they participated in God’s great redemptive work and history. UBF teaches students to obey Jesus’ word. Obedience to Jesus’ word enables us to realize we are sinners and to enter into the deep spiritual world, the world of faith and miracles (Lk 5:8). When we trust in God and obey even one of his promises, we can participate in Christ Jesus’ divine nature.

We can grow in Jesus’ character through field work training. In UBF disciples encounter many hardship and difficulties while carrying out their mission trip. We call this ‘fishing’ or ‘outreach.’ The disciples learn how to depend on God from time to time through prayer. They also share Christ’s suffering, rejection, opposition so that they may participate in Christ’s divine character: holiness, faithfulness, endurance, compassion (Isa 53:2,3, Mt 27).

We can grow in Jesus’ character through common life. Among the Twelve they competed with each other and argued with one another because they were all different in many ways- in character, interest, habit, occupation, family background, and so on. Through common life they learned how to deny themselves and to be one in Christ. They learned patience, obedience, self-control, gentleness, compassion, sacrifice, servitude, and so on by denying themselves and following the example of Christ’s life. There has been a practice of “common life” in UBF ministry. In fact, common life among brothers and sisters existed at the early stage of UBF ministry in Korea.

We can grow in Christ’ character by participate in world mission (Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:46-48; Jn 20:21-23). World salvation is God’s heart desire. Jesus wanted his disciples to share God’s heart desire with him. In order to obey Jesus’ world mission command the disciples must overcome Judaism and all kinds of human barriers. At the beginning stage of UBF in Korea, Bible teachers encouraged their students to accept Jesus’ world mission command and obey it. They gathered together and began to pray for world mission wherever they met such as, at the Bible center, at campus prayer meetings, and in conferences in mountains and at the beach. God opened their eyes to see the world and their hearts to accept the whole world as their parish.

## Examples in the Bible: Those who grew in Jesus’ character

## Apostle Paul, Apostle Peter, Apostle John, Timothy, and many others.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of God’s calling for us is to make us like Christ, to be conformed in the image of his Son. God works all things in our lives to achieve this. We can grow in the character of Christ by obeying his word, participating in his suffering for God’s world salvation work.