



Character Building Ministries
1320 Saddleback Road, York, PA 17404

(570) 772-1643

www.CBMinistries.com

LOOK UP: The Godward Orientation of Building Character

by Joel Rishel

This article originally appeared in Edify (Fall 2004), CBM's free newsletter for camp directors. If you would like to begin to receive a free copy of Edify bi-annually, just send your camp name and address to us. Permission is granted to duplicate and copy this material.

Does this sound familiar? Two young campers are arguing over their turn at the ping pong table in the gameroom. You desire to see character in their lives, so you intervene their conflict with a plan establishing how they can take turns. Or how about this? One of your staff members has been caught telling lies and unkind things about other counselors. You desire to see character in her life, so you explain to her that she is gaining a bad reputation on staff and that others aren't going to want to be around her unless she begins to speak kindly and truthfully about others. Consider one more example. You have become aware of impatience in your words and attitudes. You know that many people at camp see your life and follow your example—counselors, campers, support staff, parents, and administrative staff—and so you desire to change. Each time you are tempted to respond with impatience, you remind yourself that your attitude has an impact on those around you.

What's missing? Each of these approaches to build character omits *God*. In fact, the familiar responses I just described actually do the opposite by turning the focus inward to one's self. Young campers are being trained to share so that they can get their turn. Staff members are being conditioned to speak with kindness in order to be liked and accepted. Your pursuit of patience might be motivated by a desire to gain the respect of others and have the power of influence over them. When character is encouraged and built without reference to God, what is really taking place is an orientation of life around self. We're teaching people to ask, "What's in it for me?"

What does the Bible have to say about this? It teaches us that all people have a Godward orientation built into them by their Creator. Some people respond to their Creator in disobedience, rebellion, and unbelief, while others respond in obedience, worship, and faith. But everyone relates—whether positively or negatively—to God. This Godward orientation affects everything. It affects our motives, our relationships, our goals in life, our emotions, our conversations, our vocation, our worship, our thoughts, and yes, our character. Proverbs 4:23 teaches that the heart is the well-spring of life. So in terms of building character, this means that a life marked by Godly character must flow from a heart that worships God. The primary task in building character is nurturing a person who worships the true and living God, not just developing a list of unconnected character traits.

This has huge ramifications for how we go about building character in our own lives, in the lives of our staff members, and in the lives of campers. Our tendency is to address *behavior*. For instance, someone tells a lie. They need to be confronted on their sin of lying and taught the importance of integrity as a character-trait. Right? Well yes, certainly; but we cannot neglect the Godward orientation. The person who lacks integrity has a deeper issue that needs to be addressed. There is, at the root, a wrong view of God—a functional belief that God does not see or care what he is doing or that God is unable to do anything about it. This person’s thoughts need to be re-oriented around a Biblical view of God in order for the growth of integrity to occur.

By neglecting the Godward orientation, we can easily slide into mere “moralism.” This mistake can be identified by the motivation you use to encourage character traits. If you find yourself referring to the “golden rule”—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—then you are trying to generate character growth without reference to God. It may appear to work for a time. Perhaps you can persuade the thief to stop stealing from others because he doesn’t want other people to steal from him. But this type of “reform” will not last, nor will it provide salvation or shelter at the end of his life. Instead he needs to be taught that God desires truth in the inward parts (Psalm 51:6). He needs to understand that the bad behavior of stealing reflects a bad heart. Tedd Tripp has wisely said, “Behavior is not the basic issue. The basic issue is always what is going on in the heart. Remember, the heart is the control center of life.” *

When the heart is addressed, there is an opportunity to be re-aligned in repentance and faith to God. But if the heart is neglected, the gospel is actually being undermined by implying that we can change our behavior without having God change our heart. The danger in this is that if we can change our actions, our words, and our character, then why did Jesus need to die on the cross?

Here, then, is the real way to get results in building Godly character—the gospel. Apart from the gospel, character development is always works-oriented. But in the Scripture, character is connected to and motivated by the gospel. We should *serve* others because, “Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). We should live in *purity*, “For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Corinthians 6:20). We should be *humble* because of Christ’s supreme example, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus ... He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:5,8). We should be *generous*, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Again and again the Bible shows us that the motive to develop Godly character is not because we want others to treat us the same way, nor is it something that we generate and initiate on our own. Rather, it is a *response* to God.

Would you like to be a person of compassion, faithfulness, and integrity? Would you like to see your staff grow in gentleness, contentment, and thankfulness? Would you like to see your campers develop the qualities of courage, justice, and patience? Growth in these areas will only occur only when the Godward orientation is prioritized.