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What Is CHARACTER, and Why Does It MATTER?

After different legs of an unusually long ministry trip, my checked bag didn't reach my destination. Twice! This rarely happens to me, so I was both surprised and frustrated.

Early one morning, I joined a line at the ticket counter to check in for the third part of my itinerary and planned to ask if my bag was there. It may have arrived at the airport on a later flight, but no one notified me or brought it to me. That was my hope.

The line was long because only one attendant staffed the desk. I think everyone was a bit anxious. I was concerned, because asking her to look for my bag would take time. No one would be happy about that.

I felt myself fighting against growing impatience and a critical spirit. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. I looked at

my watch more often than necessary. I often glanced at the woman who was working the counter. She seemed efficient, but I'm sure I wasn't always smiling when I glanced her way.

My negative thoughts and self-talk were interrupted by a woman who approached me from outside the line.

"I don't mean to embarrass you, but are you Kathy Koch?"

I was so stunned I stumbled to even answer with a simple, "Yes."

"Oh my goodness! I thought it was you. I've followed you for years and I love your podcast. The episodes about character have been so good. When will the character book be out?"

I had come so close to exhibiting less-than-great character before that moment, and if I had, my testimony would have been tarnished. I'm grateful my beliefs ruled my behavior, and she interrupted before I might have given in to my frustration and behaved badly.

Why was I able to exhibit patience even though I was concerned about how little time I had before my flight would take off? Why did I keep the growing critical spirit within me silent to others? When I got to the counter and asked about my bag, why could I express gratitude that it was there and not complain that no one had contacted me to say it was there?

WHAT CAUSED ME TO BE PATIENT?

Reflecting on my experience, I realized I was patient because glorifying God through my choices is important to me. Scripture has taught me that our understanding of truth and the Holy Spirit's leading can guide us to make wise decisions. When we don't, we don't represent God well. People might question whether we're truly saved. My beliefs about God and His expectations of me are foundational. I want to be known as someone who follows God well.

Also, I realized I was patient because I have compassion for people. I see what may be wrong and desire to help. I couldn't do much for the attendant, but not acting irritated probably did help her. I didn't criticize her to others or to her face because I think the best of people. I knew it wasn't her fault she was alone at the counter. I expressed gratitude because thankfulness is a high priority for me. It's one of the best ways to stay humble and honor others. A foundational belief is that everyone has value and deserves to be treated respectfully.

I hope this example from my life shows you why you must think about the hopes and goals you have for your children. They will motivate you to prioritize teaching good character and which qualities you emphasize. Who do you want your children to be and become? Character matters today and it determines destiny.

Children can learn to have a positive and complete character. More importantly, children can learn to have a *biblical* character.

These children will use the qualities Jesus used and will be motivated by God's ways and will. They will do the right things even if the burden is heavy and no one is watching.

Thanks for trusting me and spending your valuable time with me. Truths here will empower you to have the best character you can have and teach it to your children. Then they can change culture. Let's start with some basics.

WHAT IS CHARACTER, EXACTLY?

As a child, I wrote invitations to parties, thank-you notes for gifts, get-well cards, and notes to encourage people. Hours and hours. These are my memories.

I've always loved people and writing, but that's not why I sent notes when I was young. I loved the sealing wax and the beautiful "K" seal I pressed into the wax to emboss the envelopes. I made my mark—Kathy with a K is writing you.

I remember being more joyful than you might expect when discovering the word "character" refers to tools that "sharpen, cut in furrows, or engrave" to create a "distinctive differentiating mark."¹

This appeals to me. I want my character to define me. I want the same for you and your children. Character consists of our moral qualities, ethical standards, and principles. It's observable, forms our reputation, determines our priorities, is based on beliefs

and values, and, therefore, serves as our inner governance.² It is within our control, a benefit to us and everyone we interact with, and something that can improve.

Os Guinness communicates the concept of being marked by our character this way: “Character is the inner form that makes anyone or anything what it is—whether a person, a wine, or a historical period. . . . Applied to a person, it is the essential ‘stuff’ he or she is made of, the inner reality in which thoughts, speech, decisions, behavior, and relations are rooted.”³

Perhaps you hear things like, “Your daughter is a hard worker and so pleasant. What a joy!” Or, “Your son is learning to be less competitive and kinder to children less skilled than him. I’m encouraged for him!” Or maybe you don’t hear comments like these but wish you would. Character change is possible!

Connected Qualities

When you think of character, you probably think of individual qualities (e.g., patience, loyalty, dependability, sincerity). This makes sense. Character traits are connected, though. They influence each other and don’t work alone.

Having a “web of traits” provides your children with a firm foundation. This foundation may mean that over time your children may be more characterized by obedience than sin. Like the chocolate layer of my mom’s dream bars needs the first firm layer

of flour, brown sugar, and butter, your children need a foundation.

For example, respect for others motivates compassion, caring drives service, and cooperation increases attentiveness. Confident children can be brave. And if you want to prioritize forgiveness, you'll also need to talk about remorse. Joy and gratitude feed off of each other. I could list many other combinations!

Look for character combinations in your life. Begin to realize when one character choice leads to another and then another. When you're struggling and need to make changes, think about more than one quality to use. This will make success more likely than if you start and stick with just one. Seeing how these ideas work for you will make it easier to use them with your children.

Character qualities provide a brick-by-brick foundation for a life well lived. Can you picture it? When character is wide and long

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and high and deep, it will take a lot to knock it or your children down. Most negative influences won't easily destroy children's character or push them off course. They may be entitled instead of grateful for a while, or impulsive rather

than self-controlled. But the entirety of children's character or actions won't be rocked when they can use many connected traits.

To help you as you go through the book and then apply the principles, I include a list of forty-eight key character qualities (see

the appendix). Focusing on these will be good for your children. I don't want you to be overwhelmed, and the reality that traits are connected means others will naturally develop. Also, you'll see that I list negative examples of the traits (e.g., harsh, cruel, unkind, and aggressive instead of gentle). Sometimes children's unhealthy choices and behaviors make it easier for you to see which positive quality to emphasize.

WHAT YOU WANT

I imagine you have goals regarding your children's character, or you wouldn't be reading this book. You might have more goals for their obedience. That's okay. As I'll address, they're related. Let me share here what can happen when you intentionally teach positive character. I hope you'll be encouraged! I'll follow this with a look at character in general, and then the specific biblical character that I pray you'll want your children to embrace.

Use Complete, Positive Character

Children can be marked by a solid, complete character of positive qualities they consistently use. Developing a reputation based on character is so much better than one based on popularity, beauty, and even ability. These things can come and go or fade entirely. Children's character will shape them when they're taught how to be who they can be. They'll want to be who they are made to be.

Developing a reputation based on character is so much better than one based on beauty, popularity, and even ability.

You don't want children to get into character as if they won a part in a play and must pretend to be someone they're not—angry when they're joyful or mean-spirited when they're kind. You want them to know who they are and trust you with their authentic selves.

I'm confident you want your children to have good character. Let me suggest that *using* good character is a better goal. Using their character allows them to glorify God, positively influence people and culture, and increase their contentment and success. The goal of good character is not that they're known as "good people," even though that can happen. The goal of character is to have influence and impact. Character is active. It is not something to just have. It's something to use.

Children Can Do What's Right

Children can learn right from wrong and when and why to use different character traits to behave in certain ways. They can learn what to do (e.g., be honest), want to do it, and be willing to do it. All three matter! Too many children and adults know what to do, but don't want to do it. They have to be bribed, threatened, and watched. It's exhausting! They're not living up to their potential and they're dishonoring you.

To develop both their head and heart, you'll need to parent differently. When you teach, motivate, and inspire through your example, character, words, instruction, feedback, and attitudes, your children will have both skill and will. Now they'll know what to do (persevere), want to do it (apply themselves even though the task is difficult), and be willing to do it (even if others finish first or they get teased for taking so long). They'll put others first, sacrifice, protect, care, and be able to think of the big picture. These children have the skill and will to be good!

As motivated as your children may be to want to do the right things, they won't always be successful. They're children without lots of experiences. Qualities like self-respect, self-control, respect for others, and effort must be consistently strong to support all their "being able to" and "wanting to" and "willing to." Otherwise, they may become discouraged.

You've lived life long enough to know that on our own efforts, we'll never overcome our sin nature. I praise God that we can mature and make progress. We may demonstrate mature character with one person, but not another. At one meeting, but not the next. How much more might our children struggle with inconsistencies because of fewer positive experiences?

As great as having mature character can be, without the leading of the Holy Spirit, we and our children will fall short. An authentic salvation experience that results in solid motivation to become like

Jesus and an ability and desire to follow the Spirit will change us and our children.

Children Can Want to Be Good

When children realize they *can* be good, they may *want* to be good. This is ideal! Their attitudes will make everything easier and

Wishing that children will care about being good doesn't work.

Complaining that they don't care doesn't help.

both character and obedience will be more likely. Some children tell me they don't want to whine, talk back, or throw temper tantrums. They don't want to cheat, be irresponsible, or treat people unfairly. Many want to be good! These children will be open to your teaching and correction.

Wishing that children will care about being good doesn't work. Complaining that they don't care doesn't help—praying helps! And, with the correct teaching, motivation, and inspiration, your children can develop healthy character. They can care about being good! These children will embrace important qualities. Motivation will be easier. The consequences you put in place for right and wrong choices will be more effective.

... Even If the Burden Is Heavy

Let's keep going. Your children can learn to do what's right even when the burden is heavy and their positive actions may

cost them something. For example, they can answer questions in Sunday school, even if others tease them. They can willingly stop bullies, even though they realize they might be bullied next. They might help an older person, even if friends laugh at them for doing so. Being right and doing right is worth it to them. They'll handle the burden.

... And Even If No One Is Watching

There's more great news. Effective teaching can cause children to do what's right even when no one is watching. You won't have to be a full-time spy. Your children won't behave well only to earn a reward or to avoid punishment. Therefore, you won't always have to be present. They can learn to discern how they're doing. Their self-awareness means they can be appropriately independent. This freedom is beautiful for everyone.

All of the above will most likely mark your children when you raise them with biblical character. Indeed, strong, positive, complete character is better than weak, negative, and incomplete character. Yet, being empowered by love for God, the leading of the Holy Spirit, and truth will take your children so much further. I'm looking forward to your learning about this perspective below.

WHAT IS A “BIBLICAL CHARACTER”?

Parenting differently so children develop biblical character will be worth it. Such a commitment can result in so much good! Reading the definition will show you why.

Biblical character is based on righteous qualities, virtuous standards, and irrefutable principles found in the Bible. This includes, but isn't limited to, how Jesus Christ lived His life.⁴ It's also based upon God's ways and will as taught in both the Old and New Testaments.⁵ Biblical character marks us when we are humbly obedient to the Bible's truth,⁶ disciplined to trust Jesus as Savior *and* Lord,⁷ forgive and ask to be forgiven when we sin,⁸ conformed into the image of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit,⁹ and aim to please, love, and glorify God.¹⁰ Biblical character is perfected as we develop a biblical worldview and our faith, love, wisdom, and obedience matures.

Read that definition again. Allow me to suggest that parenting so biblical character is established will be among your greatest accomplishments as a parent. This can change the trajectory of your children's lives! It can be an ultimate goal. This won't happen overnight, because learning character is a process. Younger children or older children who are new to discussions about God may live out parts of the definition before others. They'll be influenced by the example of your life before them, as well as your teaching.

The Best Part

When you intentionally teach and live out biblical character before your children, they're more likely to fully embrace it. You'll make God attractive and living for Him the best! Now, your children's love for God can compel them to want and use excellent character. They can focus on being obedient to please and glorify God rather than to earn a reward or to avoid punishment. Not depending on someone watching them constantly will mature and free them.

That's not all. When children trust Christ as their Savior, everything changes for them. Everything! I remember when I began to transition to this understanding. Because of one particular pastor, I understood that Jesus didn't just want me to live in heaven with Him forever. Yes, He was my Savior, but He took my sin upon Himself so that I could also live an abundant life *now*, with Him on earth. This is how "heaven comes down."¹¹ You don't have to do this alone! Involve your pastors, leaders, and friends, especially those your children respect.

Of course, salvation also results in us receiving God's generous gift of the Holy Spirit. Your children can learn to be led by Him. Now they don't have to try to be good on their own, which is impossible!¹²

You might be familiar with everything I've written above. That's great! Now I'm asking you to see the relevance of your

children's relationship with the triune God to their character. God doesn't just care about their eternal life. He cares about their lives now. Using biblical character will add to their abundant lives! You can parent differently so children develop biblical character. This will leave an undeniable mark!

STANDARDS: GOOD, BETTER, AND BEST

You need to decide what standards you'll raise your children with. Standards set expectations and determine what is good, better, and best.¹³ They'll determine which character qualities you'll embrace. And because character determines destiny, your standards will determine who your children become and what they accomplish.

You can think in terms of legal standards enforced by a government entity. I might suggest that people who follow these standards are just getting by. They follow rules and may not think about much else. You could choose moral and ethical standards that are based on societal norms. People who follow these standards won't do something they disagree with even if it is legal. They're typically good people. But there's more.

I'm proud of you for being interested in biblical standards. A biblical character marks you for Jesus! This character allows you to live abundantly.¹⁴ As my friend Lee Nienhuis states, "There is a standard of character we are looking for, and it is found in the heavenly Father. The transformation we are longing for in our

society, world, and homes is possible when we yield to God's Spirit. This carving of our character and that of our children is really all about living in the way of Jesus, being conformed to His image—thinking the way He thinks, serving those He would serve, and loving the way He loves.”¹⁵

BELIEFS CAUSE BEHAVIOR

For your children to develop biblical character, you need to pay attention to and address what they believe. I've been teaching that beliefs cause behavior for years. It's a helpful principle! Keep it in mind while you observe your children in light of what you read.

For instance, if your children are impatient, you can declare, “Be patient!” all day long without having a noticeable effect on their behavior. Being told what to do isn't enough. Patience may not be their most important concern. Figuring out what's causing their impatience may be.

Maybe jealousy prevents them from being patient with a sister. They believe you treated her better than you treated them. They believe all siblings should be treated the same or that they should be treated better than their siblings. Their belief and frustration resulted in impatience.

Or maybe children were impatient with their grandparents because they were self-centered. The belief that they're more important or their needs matter more caused them to treat their

grandparent inappropriately and unkindly. Teach them why these aren't true beliefs, replace lies with truth, and teach them why and how to be respectful and other-centered. You will discover your children are capable of patience.

To have a lasting influence on children's behavior and choices, including their impatience, look below the surface. Deal with their beliefs so changes in character can occur. Ask God to help you identify beliefs driving your children's behavior. You can ask them, "Why did you do that?" but most children will stare into space and mumble, "I don't know." You can help them figure it out. Long-lasting changes depend on this.

What Beliefs Matter Most?

The most important beliefs are those that will allow your children to develop biblical character. For example, they must believe in the triune God, and in what God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit has done for them, can do for them, and will do for them. They need to believe that committing to live for Him and putting Him and His ways first is wise.

Your children need to know God is on their side, has the power to protect them, and has equipped them to do great work. They need to believe they can do much for God and that being marked as a follower of Christ is the very best mark of all. Children also need to believe they can and should do the right things right. They

need to believe that being good is important and worthwhile, even if it costs them something.

The role of beliefs is such an important concept that I devote chapter 6 to fundamental beliefs and how to change them when necessary. I'm introducing the idea now so you can keep reading with this concept in mind. The longest-lasting changes in your children's character will happen when they believe what best supports the choices and decisions they need to make.

Your children need to know that God is on their side, has the power to protect them, and has equipped them to do great work.

IS CHARACTER REALLY A BIG DEAL?

Character is pervasive, controlling, and leading. This is true whether character is healthy or unhealthy. It can be positive when you thoughtfully and strategically teach good qualities and help children successfully use them across situations with anyone (school, church, job, family, friends, strangers). Character marks us because it forms the foundation of all decisions, choices, attitudes, and actions.

Think about your day and which qualities influenced you. Taking initiative? Being aggressive? Generous? Unsociable? Consistent? Unreliable? Connecting the type of day you've had to your character choices will show you how important it is to prioritize character in your parenting.

For example, my grandma nicknamed me Chatty Kathy when I was very young. My parents raised my brother, Dave, and me to speak respectfully and to listen. If they hadn't done so, I could have become a good gossip. Teasing, impressing with my words, and needing to have the last word could have been my future. I wouldn't have seen anything wrong in using all my words in unhealthy ways.

Dave and I don't remember lessons about speaking, listening, respect, and other qualities. But we knew character was significant and that putting others first was correct. Our grandfather was our city's mayor and our mom and dad were leaders in different organizations.

My parents didn't rely just on the modeling they, our grandparents, and others provided. Positive experiences and proper expectations mattered too. My parents enrolled me in children's theater when I was about ten. And because of their encouragement, I joined the speech team in high school. I wasn't raised hearing, "Be quiet! Be quiet!" Instead, I was given opportunities to use my strengths in healthy ways and to develop mature character.

Because of my background, I became a teacher, coach, earned a PhD in reading and educational psychology, and was a school board member and professor. My parents would want me to mention that they weren't perfect. But it's because of how I was raised and the strength and purpose God provides that I am a Christ

follower, founder of a ministry, author, and public speaker today. My brother, Dave, also has strong faith. He was an honoring son and is a wonderful husband, father, grandfather, and brother who also contributes significantly to his profession.

The Impact of Cultivating Character

How we're raised influences more than education and career. For example, solid friendships were only possible for me with the boundaries and guidance my parents and others provided. Picture what might have happened if I had needed to talk all the time and used words in unhealthy ways. Still today, I look for wise ways to use my character and abilities. I'm not always successful, so I'm grateful for family, friends, and colleagues who have wisdom, truth, grace, and mercy. They help me and I want that, because character is destiny!

With a positive character, children are more likely to become who God created them to be. He intentionally, strategically, and personally chose children's gifts, talents, interests, challenges, families, and more.¹⁶ Immature character robs children of their present and future. That's a big deal! They may drop out of school, experiment with drugs and alcohol, question their identity, or become abusive, apathetic, suicidal—the list goes on.

Furthermore, mature character results in fulfillment, joy, peace, gratitude, productivity, contentment, and freedom. It

God intentionally, strategically, and personally chose children's gifts, talents, challenges, and more.

means children are less likely to lie to impress, hide from hard things, or behave one way for one group of people and a different way with others. They're more likely to be blessed, successful, confident, and grow in wisdom and healthy relationships. And, of course, if they're Christ

followers, it will be easier for them to display the character of Christ. They hold His reputation in their hands. (So do we!)

Healthy character means children can already begin fulfilling God's purposes for them—to leave the world a better place. They'll be able to engage with others to solve problems. They'll want to be influential! They'll want to influence culture positively! Character for the sake of self isn't compelling. Character for others is.

The healthiest and most mature children are not just confident in themselves or you. They'll also develop confidence in God as you teach them who He is and how He is involved in their lives. Teach them they can trust His wisdom, love, leading, sovereignty, grace, and everything else. They can trust that God created them with good gifts to use and so much more.¹⁷ He is the source of all we are. Make sure you teach and model this.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you believe your life would be different if your parents had strategically thought about developing your character? How? Or, if they were thoughtful, how can you thank and honor them?
2. What could you do with your children to help them understand that our character marks us? You could buy wax and seals with your children's initials. Allow them to use them when sending letters and making decorations. You could talk about permanent and erasable markers. You could cut designs in potatoes, apples, or clay. What can you think of?
3. Reread the definition of biblical character. Which elements seem most important to solidify now?
4. Although you may change your mind as you keep reading, choose a few character qualities from the appendix that you want to prioritize for yourself and some you want to prioritize for your children. Keep these in mind as you read.

“This is the one to whom I will look:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit
and trembles at my word.”

Isaiah 66:2