

Does Your Walk Match Your Talk?

Lack of character has given today's Christians a bad rap—for good reason. It's time for us to take on the true image of Christ.

Ever wonder why some people don't want to do business with Christians? It's because they have become gun-shy: Either they themselves have been victimized by a deal gone sour or they have heard about shaky deals that have affected others. Christians have earned a reputation in the world for being undependable and lacking in character.

We have all heard horror stories of people who hired a Christian contractor to do repairs or remodeling in their homes and who were left in the lurch when the contractor disappeared, down payment in hand, without completing the work. And what about the tales of Christians who break their promises, don't pay their bills and cheat on their taxes? Some believers have become so disillusioned while doing business with Christians that they left their churches or worse still, their faith.

Thankfully, I've never reached that point. But I have been tempted to become embittered when other Christians I was in relationship with failed to "walk their talk." One situation I remember concerned a pastor who approached me to build a church in an African nation. His congregation desired to sow into a foreign mission field, and he asked me to help facilitate their vision.

The pastor agreed to supply funding for the materials, the labor costs and the land if I would use my extensive experience in the nation to make sure his church's donation was used appropriately. He instructed me to go ahead with the

project, assuring me that he would be able to raise the funds for the written budget I had sent him.

I was excited because I had worked closely with the African congregation they chose to support and was aware that they had outgrown the wood and iron shanty in which they were meeting. This rapidly growing congregation had already gone from just 25 to more than 250 members, and I knew it wouldn't be long before the almost 1,000 seats in the new building would be filled.

The first agreed-upon payment from the pastor arrived, and he and I were in regular contact about the progress. My calls were returned promptly, and all was going well.

Then I discovered that the second payment he claimed had been transferred into my account was never deposited. Suddenly, all communication ceased. Through a friend I was told that the pastor was too busy to take my calls, though he oversees a church of only 60 people. The real problem was that he was struggling to raise the money, but rather than being honest and dealing with the issue, he simply avoided it.

Under other circumstances, I would have done what I could to bail him out of trouble, but at that point I had taken financial responsibility for numerous other programs that were already under way. This project was his vision, his idea, and he had initiated it. He had approached me to assist him, but instead of accepting full responsibility he tried to put it all on me.

When I finally reached him by phone, he simply abandoned the project and chose to ignore the outstanding balance owed in Africa. He just walked away, knowing that as a Christian I would continue what he had started and that I could do nothing to hold him accountable. There was no apology, no remorse and no attempt to work through the issue; he just moved on.

This man's lack of character cost me about \$20,000. But worse

than the financial loss was the struggle not to become bitter. I eventually came away from the experience better, not bitter—but also much more cautious about engaging in business transactions with Christians!

This is a sad commentary on the condition of our souls. As Christ's representatives on Earth, we must begin to live what we learn in His Word. All the gifts and anointing in the world won't make up for a lack of character.

What is character? It is perhaps best described as the sum of moral qualities associated with a person, and suggests ethical strength and excellence. Character is about doing what is right, regardless of what is convenient or popular. It comprises the core principles and values of who you really are, both inwardly and outwardly, in your behavior and relationships.

Qualities such as faithfulness, honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, loyalty, honor, dependability and even good old-fashioned manners are basic to good character. But because so few Christians exhibit these traits, there is a huge credibility gap between society and the church today. Many unbelievers consider us a bunch of hypocrites, and the sad truth is that in many instances, they are right!

We want to win the lost for the Lord, but they won't listen to us because they see the glaring inconsistency between our message and our lifestyle. Some Christians don't get along even with other believers.

The time for change has come. Our walk must begin to match our talk.

Character vs. Anointing

A dear friend once asked me, "Leon, if you could choose just one, which would you take: character or anointing?" I asked him what he was getting at. He went on to share some examples

of anointed people who lacked credibility because of their lack of character.

I told my friend that as believers we should not desire one over the other; anointing and character must exist together as two equal forces in our lives.

To be a Christian means to be like the Anointed One, and that means to be truly Spirit-filled. Ephesians 5:18 instructs us to be filled with the Spirit, for this is the way of true Christian living.

But being filled with the Spirit does not excuse us from the necessity of developing character traits that confirm the reality of Christ in us. To be filled with the Spirit requires us to be Christlike, meaning that our attitudes, motives, words and deeds must be pure.

If we do not conduct our lives in a way that corresponds to the description of the Spirit-filled life in the Bible, we are a contradiction. If we have character but no spiritual passion, we are merely good, moral citizens. And though a good, moral life is commendable, it is not enough.

A person of character, virtue and dignity must also be a God-possessed person overflowing with spiritual zeal; these two aspects go hand-in-hand and are absolutely inseparable. Barnabas exemplified this balanced kind of life: He was a man of character who was also zealous for God.

As a result, he won many people to Christ. The Bible tells us: "For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord" (Acts 11:24, NKJV).

True spirituality is not evidenced by our ability to quote from the Bible, pray eloquently, lay hands on the sick or cast out demons. Rather, it is evidenced by the way we treat one another.

As I left the sanctuary one night after a powerful revival meeting, I noticed a small group standing around one of the ushers. From their scowls and animated gestures, I gathered they were not engaged in passionate prayer.

When I began walking toward them to find out what was going on, I was told that a disgruntled couple was reprimanding the usher because he had asked their teenage daughters to stop talking while I had been preaching. In fact, I had seen him go over to the girls to quietly ask them to stop disrupting the meeting.

Just a short while earlier, these parents had been lost in worship, standing with uplifted hands and tightly shut, tear-filled eyes. The anointing and presence of God had filled the house, yet not five minutes later we had a boxing match in the making.

What happened? Where was the anointing?

The anointing does not remove personality, emotions or free will, nor does it guarantee that we will do or say the right thing in the right way. Remember Peter, who, moments after being commended for recognizing Jesus as the Christ, was rebuked for not being mindful of the things of God.

Jesus said to him: "'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men'" (Matt. 16:23, NKJV). As powerful as it is, the anointing will not inexorably lead us to always do or say the right thing; neither will it replace the need for character.

D.L. Moody used to say that "character is what you are in the dark" when there is no one looking, no one listening. It is the thought, the desire, the intention that counts in the sight of God. We should not present a different personality in public than we do in private; there should be consistency between who we are and who we appear to be.

Character is the measure of our Christ-likeness.

There is no denying that we need more of the anointing in our lives, but we also need character. Some who desire a deep walk with God in the realms of the anointing will invest much time and effort in reading books. I believe they would do well to invest equal time in the development of their character.

As the many examples of gifted Christians around us make clear, being anointed does not guarantee maturity or character. We can have power without the traits listed above—but in the end this one-sidedness will lead to our demise.

On the other hand, it's important to remember that we all have growing up to do; none of us has arrived or is fully developed and conformed to the image of Jesus. We are Christians under construction—and making a mistake or acting immaturely in a particular instance does not mean we lack character.

We also have to keep in mind that character does not develop overnight but is a lifelong process of becoming more and more like Jesus. It is developed in the crucible of life, formed through trial and conflict and through Spirit-led introspection. As we honestly evaluate ourselves, recognizing our flaws and taking the necessary steps to overcome them, we are certain to more closely walk the talk.

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