

Opening Words

Handsome, intelligent, and strong, Peter the Great was gifted to lead, but he was also cruel and a tyrant. Personal difficulties led him to lament in his last days, “I have conquered an empire, but I have not been able to conquer myself.”

01 Living Above Reproach – Every Man’s Greatest Mission

“I have conquered an empire but I have not been able to conquer myself.” So said Peter the Great, czar of Russia from 1682-1725. Ruling the Russian people for nearly half a century, Peter accomplished more in his life than previous rulers of his land. He reformed the nation and turned it into a world power by extending its borders further than anyone else. Handsome, intelligent, and strong, he was gifted to lead, but he was also cruel and a tyrant. Personal difficulties led him to lament in his last days, “I have conquered an empire, but I have not been able to conquer myself.”

Conquering self! This is one of the greatest challenges that any man can face. While men marvel at the builders of great empires, wise men have realized that a far more significant achievement is the conquest of self. Approximately 3000 years ago, King Solomon, at the pinnacle of a power whose influence extended to the ends of the earth, remarked, “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city, (Proverbs 16:32). Alexander the Great would agree. He conquered more territory faster than any other man in history but died an alcoholic at the age of 33.

Conquering self is indeed one of the greatest challenges any man, any husband, any father can face, but it is also one that every man can master.

All of us marvel at stupendous architectural feats, whether they are ancient ones like the Pyramids or modern ones like 1000-foot-high buildings. We enjoy dramatic moments in sports where men and women push their bodies to accomplish great feats of endurance. We are amazed as actors and actresses transform themselves into completely different and believable characters. These are great achievements. But the greatest achievement is the transformation of one’s character.

How important is character building? How important is the foundation of your house? One man said, and no one knows who originally said this, but someone in history made the astute comment that character is like the foundation of a house. It is below the surface and everything else depends upon it. A good foundation, a good house. A good character, a great life.

This is not just for ourselves! Thomas Chandler Haliburton, a highly influential politician, judge, and author said, “the happiness of every country depends upon the character of its people, rather than the form of its government.”

As the apostle Paul was getting up in years, he focused on developing younger men who would continue his work long after he was gone. Two of these men were Timothy and Titus, and we have three letters Paul penned to them. In these letters, he outlined some of the essential ingredients in

the making of a real man. Paul was talking about leadership in churches. He was giving Timothy and Titus instructions on appointing leaders in churches. We find these passages in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. In both, Paul basically says, “Men, when you think about appointing leaders in the churches, elders or pastors, I want you to look for these kinds of men.” Paul then went on to describe what they should look for – men of character. In 1 Timothy 3 he listed 14 qualities. In Titus 1 he listed 14. Eight of these qualities are the same. Timothy has six that are unique to him. Titus has six that are unique in his list which gives us a total of 20 qualities when we combine the two lists. Each of these qualities has a distinct application to the realities of life.

But, let’s be realistic, remembering 20 qualities is a difficult task! One year, when I was a young pastor I did a detailed study of each of these qualities. I prayed through them and asked God to make them true in my life. But I had a hard time keeping them organized in my mind – there were simply too many to remember.

I continued to look at the list of 20 qualities, and it struck me that these could be categorized into three areas that concern every person. These three areas are one’s home life, one’s public life, and one’s private life. I called these my three arenas of life. I viewed my life as having three arenas where a great contest, a great challenge, and sometimes a great conflict was being waged. I had the great challenge of learning to be a man of character at home with my family, of being a man of character in private when no one was watching, and of being a man of character in public in the way I interacted with people. I saw how the 20 areas fit into one of these three arenas and that helped me to focus my praying and my attempt at developing the character of Jesus Christ in my life.

This is the challenge I want to lay before you today, all of you, but especially you men who are listening. I want you to be men of character at home with your family, in private when no one is watching, and in public in all your dealings with people.

As we embark on this series, I want to begin by laying down three requirements to begin this challenge. First, you must have Jesus Christ in your life. What I share with you is not another “let’s all feel good about ourselves” approach to life or some self-help seminar to motivate you to “be all you can be.” Things like that are often self-centered approaches to self-centered people who have self-centered goals. The Word of God tells us we can never be all we were created to be by living for self. We were created to live for the glory and purposes of God. That’s why He made us and that’s why Jesus Christ came to this earth and died – that he might deliver us from the dreadful god called “Self” that has afflicted every member of humanity since Adam and Eve decided to make a go of it on their own.

When a man turns to Jesus Christ, he acknowledges his sin and asks to be delivered from a path that leads to the eventual disintegration of character ... and death. He is acknowledging that life is to be lived for God and his purposes. If you embark on this quest to conquer self and develop character, remember that you first need to have Jesus Christ in your life. Only he can deliver you from the false paths of greatness that so many have followed to a dead end.

A second requirement is this – you need to realize that Christ came to empower you to live on the right path. Jesus doesn’t just point the way to go. He walks with us on the path, empowering us and

encouraging us along the way. When a person seeks daily for the power of Christ he will be able to live as Christ lived.

Requirement #3 is this, your embarking on this mission to become a man of character or to deepen your existing character will be successful only if you have the correct vision for personal growth and development. If you are interested primarily in career development, this task is not for you. If your great goal in life is fame, this task is not for you. If your number one desire is to become wealthy, this is not your mission and you won't get very far. You must repent of these idols in your life. That's what they are. An idol is not just something made of wood or stone or precious metal that people in some countries bow down to. An idol is any good thing in creation that we put in the place of God. In our Western culture, idolatry is as rampant as in eastern civilizations. Westerners worship the body, fame, power, wealth. We must guard ourselves against every form of idolatry.

Many make the body an idol –outward beauty is given such prominence, but we are to make the cultivation of Christ like character most important.

Many make fame an idol – but we have learned through Christ that it's not how many know and love us, it's not having our name in lights that matters. It's being known by the eternal God.

Power can be an idol – but Christ has taught us it's not how many people we manage, or control, it's how many people we serve that matters.

Wealth can be an idol – it's not how much we accumulate, it's how much we give away that matters.

I pray that if any of you are bound by any of these idols, you will repent of them, dethrone them and place Jesus Christ upon the throne of your heart. Then, you will be able to have the right goal, developing Christ like character.

History is strewn with men who gained a certain degree of fame only to see their achievements crumble in the end. The sad part is that none of them had to fail for God's desire is for every man to have lasting achievement and to become all that God created him to become. That is God's desire for you. May he empower you to take up the challenge and may he guide you along the way.

How important is character building? Well, how important is the foundation of your house? A good foundation, a good house. A good character, a great life.