

CHARACTER by Gary Henry, submitted by Pam Lenza

“Unless the vessel is clean, what you pour into it turns sour” (Latin Proverb).

CONCERNING CHARACTER, IT’S IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT GOOD CHARACTER COMES FROM OUR DECISIONS, NOT FROM OUR CIRCUMSTANCES.

Those who spend their lives waiting for their ship to come in, thinking that their true character can’t be developed until they get their big break, are turning one of life’s great priorities upside-down. Choices concerning our character should come first, not last. If and when we do get the circumstances we’re hoping for, if our character isn’t what it ought to be, those circumstances will turn out to be seriously disappointing. *“Unless the vessel is clean, what you pour into it turns sour.”*

But if it’s important to think rightly about our character with regard to the future, it’s also important to do so with regard to the past. There is a Jewish proverb which says, “A man is what he is — not what he used to be.” This is a double-edged truth. On the sobering side, we need to admit that good character in the past is no substitute for good character in the present. What we are is what we are, not what we used to be. Having been a good person at some point in the past doesn’t give us a lifetime exemption from any further effort.

The other side of this truth, however, is encouraging. If our character has been bad in the past, that fact does not doom us to having the same character forever. We’re not inherently bad; we just need to change for the better. If we do, then our character is what it is, not what it used to be. *Character comes from our decisions, not from our circumstances.* And freedom of the will means that better decisions are ours for the making every single day that we live in the world.

Compared to the things we typically spend our time working on, the building of solid character needs to get more of our attention. What we *are* (our character) is a good deal more important than what we *have* (our possessions). It’s even more important than what we *do* (our accomplishments). When the final tally is made, what we will want more than anything is to have had hearts that were true and just.

“What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us” (Ralph Waldo Emerson).