

A Contrast in Character

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Character is important. It is a person's moral or ethical quality that makes up the character. It constitutes one's reputation. Someone with good character is respected by men; they can be trusted and their good character will be appreciated. Someone with a bad character will be looked at disparagingly and will always be viewed suspiciously. God also considers one's character important, and His acceptance of individuals depends largely on their character. It is axiomatic to say that someone with good character is one who will humbly submit to God, but one with bad character is full of pride, stubbornness, and selfishness.

The first two kings of Israel provide an excellent contrast in character from which we can learn valuable lessons. Saul and David could not have been any more different in all aspects of their life, especially their character.

For instance, Saul was from a prominent family. His father was "a mighty man of power" (1 Sam. 9:1). And Saul was "a choice and handsome young man. There was not a more handsome person than he among the children of Israel. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people" (9:2). David was quite different. He was youngest son from the family of Jesse and was a simple, lowly, shepherd boy. But as God told Samuel, He doesn't look at people the same way men do. "For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

And it's the heart, or the character, of these two kings that set them apart; Saul for the worse and David for the better. We see the poor character of Saul demonstrated when he was confronted with his sin in 1 Sam. 15. God had told Saul through Samuel to attack the Amalekites, "and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Sam. 15:2). The command was simple. It was specific. There was nothing that was vague about the command, and it could not be disputed. Yet Saul did not completely obey the word of the Lord.

Saul and the people destroyed most of the Amalekites, but decided to spare Agag the king, "and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to destroy them" (1 Sam. 15:9). When Samuel came to Saul, Saul greeted him by saying, "Blessed are you of the LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD" (1 Sam. 15:13). Like so many today, he believed he had obeyed God when in reality he had only partially obeyed God. It didn't matter that his reason for keeping the animals was to sacrifice to God; it was disobedience. And like so many today, instead of admitting his sin immediately, he offered excuses. As a result, God rejected Saul from being king over Israel. The rest of Saul's reign was little more

than a display of his bad character: jealousy, attempted murder, envy, and eventually, suicide.

David was far from perfect. He, too, committed some terrible sins. He lusted after Bathsheba, coveting his neighbor's wife. He then committed adultery with her, and when she reported she was pregnant, tried to cover up his sin by bringing her husband home from the war to go in to his wife. When Uriah refused to go home, he got him drunk, hoping he would then go home and sleep with his wife. When that didn't work, he had him murdered. Pretty bad character, right? Yes, and no. Yes, for what he had done. No for the way he responded afterwards. When Nathan the prophet confronted him, he didn't deny he had sinned, nor did he offer any excuses. Instead, he immediately said, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Sam. 12:13).

David wrote Psalm 51 shortly after these events, a psalm which shows the extent of his sorrow and repentance, a psalm which shows his good character. In it, he wrote, "For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done this evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:3-4). Yes, what he did was terrible. But the way he responded to God's displeasure is what made him "a man after God's own heart." He had the character God wants all of us to have toward obedience and towards sin. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart. These, O God, you will not despise" (Ps. 51:17). David definitely had a broken and contrite heart. That was his character.

Saul admitted to his sins, but God rejected him. David admitted to his sins, but God accepted him. What was the difference? Their character.

How do you respond to your sin? Does your character more closely resemble Saul or is it like David? It doesn't have to be some major series of sins as in the case of David. It could be as simple as having too much pride. Or maybe you envy someone else's status in life. It might be that you struggle with lying.

Whatever the case, the way you respond to your sins will determine how God views your character, and whether you will be accepted or rejected. Our attitude must be one of humility, contriteness, and complete repentance. We need to make David's prayer our own: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me" (Ps. 51:10-11).