**Five Tests of Our Character**

Romans 5:4

I. **Introduction:**

1. In business there is an axiom to the effect that if your business is not growing and improving it is moving backwards. There is no such thing as maintaining the status quo (e.g., *Blockbuster* video).

2. The same is true of Christianity: You’re either growing as a Christian or you’re moving backwards. There’s no such thing as achieving a certain level of “growth” and then just maintaining that level. If you’re in a “maintenance” mode in reality you’re probably growing weaker.

3. I hope this lesson helps each of us move forward and grow (2 Pet. 3:18).

A. I urge each of you to make application of this lesson to yourself, not to others (Matt. 7:3).

B. Use this lesson as an opportunity for self-examination (2 Cor. 13:5). Honest self-examination is one of the most profitable activities in which we can engage (Jer. 17:9; Jas. 1:22-25).

4. 2 Paul tells us in Rom. 5:4 that it’s important for us to develop “character.” This lesson concerns five things that provide a “Testing [of] Our Character”:

A. If we will try not to think about someone else, but measure our own lives, we will derive the most good from this lesson (2 Cor. 10:12).

B. I urge you to be brutally honest with yourself and see how you measure up to these five tests!

II. **Discussion:**

1. 3 *A Command Contrary To Your Idea*:

A. How do you react to one of God’s commands if it does not agree with your idea?

(1) Do you say there are no such commands?

(2) Think again! I would wager (using that word accommodatively!) all of us could come up with a few of God’s commands that at least make us uncomfortable.

B. 4 The Bible tells us a famous story about a man who did not agree with a command of God (2 Kgs. 5:1-14). Briefly relate the story of Naaman.

(1) Naaman found the right source to heal his leprosy, and was told to do something very simple by God’s prophet: *“Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.”* (2 Kings 5:10)

(2) But how did he react to God’s command? *“But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.* ***12*** *Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage.”* (2 Kings 5:11-12)

(3) You see, Naaman had already made up his mind as to how it ought to be done! God’s command did not please him.

(4) How do you react when one of God’s commands don’t please you? Become like Naaman?

(a) Became mad: *“But Naaman was wroth…”*

(b) Turned his back on God: *“and went away…”*

(c) Substituted his own wisdom for God’s wisdom: *“Behold, I thought…”*

(5) Was there anything magical about the waters of the Jordan versus those of *“the rivers of Damascus”*? No!

(a) The power was not in the water! The power was in the command of God! Rom. 1:16-17; Prov. 10:8

(b) When Naaman obeyed, what happened? *“Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.”* (2 Kings 5:14)

(c) There are a lot of people just like Naaman today! Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Gal. 3:26-27; 1 Pet. 3:21 (also work, worship, organization of the church, MDR)

(6) From Naaman we learn that if there is ever a commandment the Lord gives, contrary to our thinking, if we ever are to get benefits of that commandment, we are going to have to harmonize our will with His, change our thinking to be in harmony with His commandment…simple as that! Isa. 55:8-9; Jer. 10:23; 1 Jn. 5:3

C. 5 The Bible also tells us another story about a man who did not agree with a command of God (Acts 10 & 11). Briefly relate the story of Peter and the sheet.

(1) Three times the voice from heaven told Peter:

*“Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.”* (Acts 10:13), and,

*“What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.”* (Acts 10:15)

(2) This was totally contrary to anything Peter had ever imagined! Peter thought the gospel was only going to be preached to the Jews. This incident also demonstrates that men are subject to more than “direct commands;” God expects us to use His revelations to draw *necessary conclusions*!

(3) But, he got God’s point: *“And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.”* (Acts 10:28)

(4) Peter got “called on the carpet” for preaching the gospel to Gentiles! See Acts 11:2-3

(5) Note Peter’s answer: Acts 11:15-17; especially note: *“who was I that I could withstand God?”* (Acts 11:17)

(a) Clearly and distinctly the Lord was commanding Peter to go preach to the Gentiles.

(b) Such was in disagreement with Peter’s thoughts and attitudes.

(c) But Peter’s attitude in the matter was, “I’ve got to do what God said for me to do, regardless of what I think…*who am I to withstand God?”*

(d) You and I ought to have that attitude when we find anything, regardless of what it is, that doesn’t suit us!

D. 6 You think there are no commands of God which members of His church disagree? How about: Eph. 5:23-25; Col. 3:5; Heb. 10:25; Matt. 19:9; 2 Thess. 3:6; Heb. 13:12?

2. 7 *Criticism*:

A. How do you react to criticism?

(1) From time to time, we all are going to be criticized, fairly or unfairly.

(2) Criticism can be quite painful, hence, it is a huge test of our character.

B. How should you react to criticism, fair or unfair?

(1) Most get mad and say, “Well, if that’s the way they feel about it, I’ll just quit. If that’s going to be your attitude, I’m out of here!”

(2) Our first reaction is usually negative. Criticism puts us on the defensive; we defend ourselves by making excuses and/or by retaliating with criticisms of their own.

(3) A better first response would be to seriously consider the criticism: “Am I guilty as charged?” Perhaps the criticism is true and I can become a better person by considering it and making some necessary changes in my life (Acts 15:37-40; 2 Tim. 4:11).

C. 8 Reacting to unfair criticism. We find a case of this in Nehemiah chapter 4.

(1) Sanballat initiates the unfair criticism (vss. 1 & 2); Tobiah reinforces the criticism (vs. 3).

(2) What did the Jews do?

(a) First, when criticized unfairly for the service to God, they realized that in actuality, they were not being criticized, but the criticism was really aimed at God (vss. 4-5).

(b) So, they just kept on doing what was right! vs. 6

(3) 9 When somebody begins to criticize you in your religious life, are you big enough to accept it? Do you…

(a) As with all criticism, first seriously consider that the criticism may be legitimate? We show *weak* character when fail to at least consider criticism! cf. Acts 17:11

(b) If the criticism is not legitimate, if it’s unfair, then realize the criticism is really aimed at God (Matt. 10:24-25; 1 Pet. 4:12-14).

(c) Just keep on building!! Matt. 5:11-12

(4) 10 Consider Paul’s response to unfair criticism (2 Cor. 10:10).

(a) Remember the charges? *“’For his letters,’ they say, ‘are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.’”* (2 Cor. 10:10)

(b) Was ever a more false charge made?

(c) How would you have reacted upon receiving such unfair criticism? “Now if that is what people think of my preaching, I’ll just quit and go back to tent making!” “I’m out of here! I’m going back to Tarsus!”

(d) 11 How did Paul react? Phil. 1:12-18

(5) Regardless of the criticism leveled against us for doing God’s will, we just need to press on (Matt. 10:24-25). Most won’t be satisfied regardless of what you do! Matt. 11:18-19

3. 12 *When You Don’t Get Your Own Way*:

A. How do you react when you don’t get your way? Whine? Pout? Sulk? Take your ball and go home?

B. 13 Let’s find an example of what holy men of God did when they didn’t get their way. Paul didn’t always get his own way!

(1) Paul ran into “blank walls” often (Acts 16, 17, 18, etc.).

(2) What is he going to do? Quit? Move back to Tarsus and take up tent making? Sell insurance? He didn’t quit! 1 Cor. 9:16

C. 14 We are not guided by the Holy Spirit in the same exact way as Paul, but we are directed by Him! For example,

(1) Need is still the same as in Paul’s day (Rom. 3:23; 6:23; 1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9).

(2) Fields just as *“white unto harvest”* as in the first century (Jn. 4:35).

(3) Hence, we cannot quit! Mk. 16:15-16; Lk. 8:11-15; 1 Cor. 3:7, 9

D. True story: Jim Popple

E. 15 We can never compromise the truth, but in matters of judgment (e.g., Rom. 14 issues) we need to be flexible enough and have enough character that when we don’t get our way we react properly with a good dose of humility (Phil. 2:3-5).

4. 16 *Persecution or Mistreatment*:

A. What do you do, how do you react, when people mistreat you or persecute you for being a faithful Christian?

B. 17 Consider Paul: *“Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.”* (Acts 14:19)

(1) If I had been in Paul’s shoes, quite frankly, I don’t know what I would have done.

(2) What if a bunch of thugs came into this building during this service and dragged me into the parking lot and gave me a *“supposing him to be dead”* beating? What would you do? Get in your car and go home? Paul didn’t go home, he didn’t quit. 18

*“However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.* 21 *And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch,* 22 *strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.’”* (Acts 14:20-22)

(3) This was a real test of character and Paul passed it with flying colors!

C. We’ve already read of Paul’s character along these lines in 2 Cor. 11:23-28. Why was Paul talking about these things? Was he having a pity party? (Explain context)

(1) Even in the face of mistreatment and persecution, the likes of which we will probably never see, notice Paul’s philosophy: Phil. 1:18

(2) In this regard, I pray to God that I might have even 10% of the character of a man like Paul, or a Peter (Acts 5:40-42), a Stephen (Acts 7:60), or a John (Rev. 1:9)!

5. 19 *Failure*:

A. How do you react to failure? Perhaps this is the hardest test of all.

B. When we allow the discouragement of failure to overwhelm us we are Satan’s easiest prey! Gen. 4:6-7

C. 20 Remember the account given in Luke 5:1-5?

(1) What were Simon and his cohorts? Professional fisherman…they knew what they were doing.

(2) What had happened to them? They had failed, *“Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing”* (vs. 5).

(3) Had they quit because of their failure? No, text says they *“were washing their nets”* (vs. 2). They were getting ready to go fishing again, maybe tomorrow, maybe another day, but they were not quitting, they were making ready for when the time would be right for another fishing trip.

(4) This is one of the characteristics Jesus wanted in the men He chose to be His apostles.

(a) He knew there would be times that, after they had done the best they could possibly do, it would result in (apparent) failure.

(b) Did you ever, with all your might, try something and still fail?

(c) You used all your ingenuity and strength, but you just failed; you just didn’t cut it?

(d) That’s what Peter and his fishermen cohorts had just done, but they didn’t quit! This is the kind of people Jesus was looking to be the fishers of men.

(e) 21 The character of Peter is shown in this verse (v. 5). Notice the most significant statement in the whole passage: *“Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.”* (vs. 5)

(f) We know what we’re doing Lord. We are professional fisherman. We fished all night and we didn’t catch a thing. Nevertheless, *at thy word*, I will let down the net.

(g) 22 The rest of the story (vss. 6-7).

(h) The Lord knows when we’ve tried, done our best, and failed. He knows the effort we’ve put forth. He sees all that, understands and knows it. The point is: In the face of failure, do not quit!

(5) 23 Paul was certainly “cut from this cloth” (2 Cor. 11:23-29; all of his work recorded in Acts).

(6) Many areas of application:

(a) Preaching the gospel (Lk. 8:11-15; 1 Cor. 3:6-9).

(b) Mortifying the flesh (Col. 3:5ff; Rom. 7:15; Phil. 3:13-14; Lk. 9:23).

(c) Setting a good example (Matt. 5:13-16; 2 Cor. 3:2).

III. **Conclusion:`**

1. 24 Can we pass these five tests of character?

A. The Lord expects us to do what we can, and he expects us to stand.

B. But if we think we can make it on our own, we are wrong.

C. 25 How shall we stand? Trust! Jude 24; Psalm 18:2-3

D. Realize our standing does not depend wholly on us (Phil. 4:13), but we have to do something! 1 Cor. 10:13

E. The Lord is there, He cares, He’s concerned, He’ll help! 1 Jn. 2:1; Hebrews 4:15-16; (Barnes Notes: *“…come without hesitancy, or trembling, and ask for all the mercy that we need.”*)

2. If we will think about these tests of character, and try our best daily to measure up to them, I know we will be more like the kind of persons God intended for us to be.

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