

“The Character of God”

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A few weeks ago, I used an example from a book that David Brooks wrote called “The Road to Character,” and I have another story from that book that I would like to share with you. He begins - and I’m quoting - he said, “I’ve recently been thinking about the difference between the resume virtues and eulogy virtues.” Resume virtues and eulogy virtues. He said they are not the same. Eulogy virtues are deeper. Eulogy virtues are the kind of things that you talk about at someone’s funeral. That’s why they are called “eulogy” virtues. They exist at the core of your being - whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful. What kind of relationships you formed. Those are the eulogy virtues that are within you.

Most of us, I think, would say that eulogy virtues are more important than resume virtues. But, David Brooks said, today our educational system is certainly oriented around resume virtues more than eulogy virtues. We are being taught on how to get a job, more than we are taught how to live. He said most of us have a clearer strategy for how to achieve career success, than we do on how to develop profound character. He continues, we live in a culture that teaches us to promote and advertise ourselves, and to master the skills required for success; but that gives us little encouragement for how to be humble, to show sympathy, to have honest self-confrontation, which are necessary to produce character.

Now we all need to think about what it means to have a strong character; because we are all going to be tested in this life. We are all going to find what it means to be in the winds of adversity, to feel the flood waters of our lives coming right up to here [Scott gestures up to his neck], and how are we going to respond in that moment? Resume virtues don’t help us with that, because if you have lost your job, a resume virtue can’t help you when the waters are up to here [Scott gesturing up to his neck again]. What is on your resume ain’t going to matter. That is when you need the eulogy virtues.

At the time of Noah, God was disappointed by the humans that God created. We weren’t living up to God’s expectations, according to the story. Rather than break and destroy the creation entirely, God retained a remnant and in that remnant, according to the biblical story, we are supposed to understand God to be a God of character - because God never wants to destroy, but to rebuild and make better - and that is a glimpse into God’s character. Take away the whole murderous part of it and focus on the remnant. God does not want to destroy us, even though we fall short of God’s glory. And that fits with what happens, with what God does, coming to earth in Jesus Christ, so that we can be reconciled with God - so we can be forgiven by God, so that we can be restored by God. *That* shows the character of God in what God did through Jesus Christ: Never giving up on us - *always* finding a way to restore us and fulfilling that covenant that went all the way back to Noah.

David Brooks tells the story of this little boy named George Marshall. George grew up in the United States. He was born in 1880. George came from a very famous, historical family, but with that came a great deal of pressure. George’s dad struggled, because his dad did not have the financial skills to keep the family fortunes up. He didn’t quite have the character of former people, and he didn’t raise as high in political office. he didn’t raise himself high in industry, so he always had this self-conscious feeling that he was never enough.

So, he pushed his two boys very hard. He pushed his little son George and his [George's] older brother Stuart to be everything he [the father] had not been. How often parents do that.

And, George, unfortunately, was not a very bright, sparkling child.

Stuart was everything. He was Mr. Perfect.

Meanwhile, little George just never lived up [to his dad's expectations], and there was never a moment when George's dad didn't remind him that he was not living up to the Marshall name. It was terrible. And George did exactly what any teacher or health care worker would expect: George rebelled, and George gave up.

He remembered one day when he went to school - he might have been in what is now 2nd or 3rd grade - and in those days, you had to sit down with the Superintendent of Schools, and you had an oral examination to determine where to put you in school. You weren't just placed by your grade - you were placed by where you were with your understanding, and you worked your way up, kind of at your own level.

So, the Superintendent - with George's dad present - asked George questions starting with the simplest questions, with them getting harder and harder as it went along and that would determine his placement. Well, poor George was so nervous and so scared, he couldn't even answer the simplest questions. His dad just looked at him with a sneer and snarl and just walked out. George had absolutely no hope, he was totally despondent, disappointed and embarrassed.

Now, George's legacy continued academically. Later in life, he said, "I wasn't just a poor student, I was a non-student. My academic record was a terribly sad affair." No one had ever listened or gave him any support. And he grew more and more mischievous and troublesome.

Well, George only had one goal: He wanted to go to the Virginia Military Institute. His grandfather, his father, and his brother Stuart now, had graduated and had gone on to VMI. And, by golly, George wanted to go to VMI - but he didn't have the grades and he didn't have the attitude. He was a mess.

What made it even worse was, one day he overheard his brother home from college saying to his mother, "Please don't let George go to VMI. I know you can buy his way in, but don't do it. He is an *embarrassment* to the family."

Well, George was so devastated. But this time rather than just giving up, he got ticked off and decided, I'm tired of this. He was so angry. He went out and was just knocking the world over. He stuck to his guns, and tried to learn how to literally read and write, and do whatever he had to do to get in. He only had two years to make up for all of the years of ignorance. He studied hard and he got by with a B-. And, with being a legacy and everything else, he got into VMI.

Now what was interesting about that, was that David Brooks, the author of "The Road to Character," jumped in the middle of this story and said - at some critical point - let me back up.

The average GPA for self-made millionaires is not an A+ or an A-. It is not even a B. The average self-made millionaire's collegiate record is a B-, on average. Now, they are not always the smartest people academically, but almost to a person, he said, they were taken in a moment they were frustrated, or made angry, or humiliated, to a point where they had a choice - that they could give up or get ticked. And, the self-made millionaires - by and large - got ticked, got angry, and did, out of whatever was necessary, to pull themselves up and fight for their lives, to make a difference.

Whatever that motivation was in life, they did it to make a difference. And they were not going to get beat on or put down any longer. Now George went to VMI and he was a success. He went on to judge and prove himself. He wanted to finally be looked on as being proud of by his family. Brooks talks about quotes from famous, brilliant people in history to prove out why little, lazy George Marshall figured out how to be a success.

He quoted the Roman biographer Plutarch. Plutarch said that success is based on the premise that tales of excellence can lift the ambitions of the living. In other words, it isn't something internal. We need an example to follow.

Thomas Aquinas argued that in order to lead a good life, it is necessary to focus more on our exemplars than ourselves. Now, look at all of these darn self-help books today, telling you how you can fully self-articulate yourself and become something. No, it's by example. Less self-help and more Biography Channel to get us to find the road to what is successful.

Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead argued, moral education is impossible without the habitual vision of greatness. That is what it takes. To have someone you can look up to and focus on. That is why the Bible is so important. You go back. It isn't about reading laws; it's about reading stories that motivate you. How God reacted to that person can help influence how God might react and work with me. I find it a joy that all of these biblical characters are less than perfect. Then maybe God might do something with me because I'm certainly a lot less than perfect. "Look God, I'm right here for you. You have a lot to work with." And that is exactly what they did in the Bible, over and over.

In 1943, Richard Winn Livingstone wrote, "One is apt to think of moral failure as due to weakness of character. Now, remember this if you are a teacher working with a bad child or a difficult child - one is apt to think of moral failure as due to weakness of character. More often it is due to an inadequate ideal. We detect in others, and occasionally in ourselves, the want of courage, of industry, of persistence which leads to defeat. When these children don't have any role models they don't know anything else but problems and mistakes. But we do not notice the more subtle and disastrous weakness: that our standards are wrong and that we have never learned to be good."

You show me a person in prison and I'm willing to show you that, nine times out of ten, that person didn't learn the [good] values at home, not always but often.

VMI taught habits of institutionalized self-discipline to George. He needed it. Little, lazy George needed to suck it up and learn how to be a success.

And now I want to tell you, as Paul Harvey used to say, "And now, the rest of the story." (Boy, how I miss him.)

George Catlett Marshall – little, lazy George – displayed a strong desire to be as close to flawless in all things as possible, after he got angry and went back, and wanted to get into VMI. When he got in, they taught him renunciation. Renunciation is the ability to forego small pleasures to have much greater pleasures down the road. VMI was the place where the young went to acquire hardiness. They would need to be worthy in the struggle of life.

Little, slow, lazy George Marshall went on to become the Chief of Staff of the United States Army under Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman. Little, lazy George Marshall went on to become Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense under President Harry S. Truman. Little, lazy George was hailed as the “Organizer of Victory” by Winston Churchill, for leadership of the Allied victory in WWII.

Little, lazy George advocated significant United States economic help and political commitment to the post-war European Recovery. In other words, he said, “You can’t just destroy the Axis Forces, or we will be fighting them forever. We must rebuild them.” I wish we learned that today. They celebrated little, lazy George’s ideas, and George Marshall’s recovery plan became the “Marshall Plan.”

In 1953, little George, who was supposed to be the family embarrassment, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Character isn’t born, according to David Brooks. Character is molded and achieved through hard work and determination. It is figuring out as parents, as teachers, as a church family, how to find the child that wants something; how you motivate them; how you encourage them; how you make them feel that they are capable - not worthy - because when you make them feel worthy, then they think they can do it no matter what. That’s false pride. You make them feel capable, so that if they work hard enough, strive long enough, they will be able - and that is the key.

I believe that David Brooks is right. We develop character by learning it. Like George Marshall, each one of us learns through reading about other great leaders, how to develop character within ourselves. Through amazing, humble church people, I was blessed with the understanding of how to follow a good path, when I had a whole lot of examples that were not all that great in my own family.

So, I ask, who molded you? Try to remember those individuals today. Give thanks to God for them. And then, how have you molded other people? How could you be doing a little bit more? If you are teaching Sunday School or you are here on Wednesday nights, you are molding people. You are molding those young people. You are helping them realize that they are valuable, and that when they work hard, they are capable - not worthy - but capable. And then, prayerfully ask God to give you the love, character, faith and compassion, to continue to live out your faith being an example and working hard to provide character in other people.

Finally thank God for the blessing that God, or we as human beings, have not destroyed ourselves, but that God continues to work in and through us, so that all of us may one day say, “Thank you, God. I was a good and faithful servant.”

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.