



Proverbs 3:1-6
 Character and Reputation
 Character Trumps Reputation, But...

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This morning we start a new series of messages that will take us into the first Sunday of November. In this series we are going to take a look at what the Bible says about our character and our reputation. The two are linked together, which makes it easy to get them confused. And unfortunately reputation is often an imperfect reflection of character. With the advent of social media and the displaying of people's lives and opinions for the world to see...with the chaos in the world right now and a lot of people doing a lot of speaking but not a lot of good listening...in light of all that: spending time considering our character and our reputation is important.

And: I would suggest to you that the importance of this topic is especially true of Christians, because everything we say or do doesn't just reflect on ourselves, but upon Jesus Christ. There is a bigger ramification to how we live our lives. Our character and our reputation impacts how people perceive God - Jesus in particular - and how they generally perceive Christians.

I'm not one to usually just give Dictionary definitions for things like this, but just to get us all on the same page, let's look at what character is. As with any word, there are various definitions that can be similar and overlapping, as well as definitions that can be quite different. Character can refer to a person in book or a movie; it can also be a printed or written letter or symbol. But that's not the kind of character we're talking about here. We're talking more about character as in our moral and ethical values. Oxford Dictionary says: **Character is: "The mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual."** Sub-definitions below that give related variations such as "strength and originality in a person's nature" or "the distinctive nature of something" or even "a person's good reputation" (Oxford Dictionary at [lexico.com](https://www.lexico.com)).

Pastor A.W. Tozer has said that character is "the excellence of moral beings." Just as purity is the excellence of gold, and beauty is the excellence of art, and winning is the excellence of the Seahawks, so the excellence of people is

our character.¹ Of course, not all people's character is all that excellent. That's a big reason why we have police officers, courts, and prisons.

Reputation means: "The beliefs or opinions that are generally held about someone or something," with a sub-definition (the next one) of, "A widespread belief that someone or something has a particular habit or characteristic" (Oxford Dictionary at lexico.com). Notice, just as "reputation" showed up in one of the sub-definitions of character, here the word "character" shows up in a sub-definition of reputation, in the root word for characteristic. So a person's reputation (or a church's or an entire religion's) is what is generally held by others, or what is the widespread belief by others, in regards to that person, church, or religion or whoever it may be.

So our desire as Christians is that our reputation and our character are in alignment with one another as best as possible. The widespread belief that is generally held about us individually, as a church, as a faith, ought to be the same - or very similar - to our character - the moral and spiritual qualities that make us distinctive at an individual and corporate level. I would suggest to you, however, that: **Our character is not usually as good – or as bad – as our reputation is.** Again: our reputation is an imperfect reflection of our character. And in this series we will look at a number of passages in the Bible that speak to both our character and our reputation and why they both matter.

And this morning we're in **Proverbs 3:1-6**.

As many of the Proverbs are, this one is written from the perspective of a parent to a son. It's really the theme throughout its entire 31 chapters. We see this in various places in Proverbs including right at the beginning after an initial 7 verse introduction when we read, "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction, and do not forsake your mother's teaching" (Proverbs 1:8).

And then: **Throughout the Proverbs there's an emphasis on gaining wisdom.** In fact, just a short bit later, we read this in Proverbs 4:7: The beginning of wisdom is this: Get[a] wisdom. There's got to be some

¹ Most of this sentence came directly from a "GotQuestions.org" article on the topic of "what does the Bible say about character?" You can probably guess which part didn't come from the article. □

correlation to answering the question of which comes first: the chicken or the egg. So Proverbs, more than any other book in the Bible, and perhaps next followed by James which we spent a couple months in this past spring, Proverbs really emphasizes getting wisdom and living with wisdom.

So in the first couple verses in today's passage, the father is teaching his son some lessons. And then there is a promise of blessing that comes with it: This wisdom can help prolong your years, it will give you peace in life, and this wisdom will bring prosperity. At the end of today's reading we also see the promise that the Lord will make your paths straight - no crooked paths of life, no detours off the right path when we trust God and "lean not on our own understanding."

We then get two things (in verse 3) that in the language of our series we could call "character traits": Love and faithfulness. They're kind of sandwiched in between the blessings and the benefits of living with wisdom (long life, etc., and straight paths). These are characteristics, or values, that are near and dear to God's heart, and so they matter to the life of the Christian. This should come as no surprise to those of us who have followed Jesus for any length of time. In fact, in Matthew 22, Jesus boils down the entire "law and prophets" - which is a shorthand way of saying the first five books of the Bible which are commonly referred to as "the Law" and the books of the Bible known as the prophetic books. All told, it's probably 2/3 of the Old Testament. And Jesus is saying all of that boils down to two great commandments: Love God with all of you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40).

"Love" is explicitly lifted up by Jesus here. And then "faithfulness" is one of the great attributes of God that we see throughout Scripture. Psalm 100:5, for example says, **"For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations" (Psalm 100:5).** So even our love is fashioned after God's love which endures forever...but we also see here his faithfulness. God is faithful - through all generations. Lamentations 3:23 famously reminds us that the Lord's mercies "are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." So God loves the world, and he is faithful to the world.

And we are to have that same character. Why? Why is it important for us to embody these characteristics? The answer is in the next verse: **“Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and people” (Proverbs 3:4)**. I think we Christians tend to focus on the themes in this verse up until the last two words. We want to have God’s favor. We want to live in a way that pleases God. We know that God loves us regardless. We know that God forgives us when we sin. But we really don’t want to abuse that and so we want to live rightly for God. We want God’s favor and to have a good name. But I think we frequently do not think about maintaining that good name for the sake of people...or gaining the favor of people.

And it’s understandable why. We aren’t called to be people-pleasers, but rather to be God-pleasers. **Jesus said, “You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22)**. Paul writes in Romans, “Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires” (Romans 8:5). We don’t want to be worldly and concerned with the world. Earlier in Romans 1:16, Paul writes, “I am not ashamed of the gospel” and it’s meant, in part, to encourage *us* not to be ashamed of it, either. Don’t worry about what others think of your faith - just live it out regardless of the consequences. And of course we revere Christians who have suffered for what they believe in the face of people who hated them for their beliefs.

All of this adds up to a lot of us wanting very much to believe, say, and do things that please God - so we’d have a good name with him - without giving much thought to the name we have with people, or even intentionally believing that we *shouldn’t* care what others think about us in regards to our faith.

But this Proverb says that our good character of love and faithfulness is not only to give us a good name with God but also with people. We might wonder why we should care what our reputation is. Elsewhere in Scripture we learn that we are to have a good reputation with people for God’s sake. I don’t mean that phrase in a crass, unholy way; I literally mean we want to

have a good name - a good reputation - for the sake of the Lord, for God's reputation. It's not for our own benefit. This is not about our ego or our name or our fame. It's all about making Jesus known, and doing so in a way that others would be attracted to Him. So character trumps reputation - character is the starting point, it's the foundation; but reputation matters. Your reputation, my reputation, our church's reputation, the reputation of the Church (Capital "C") matters, because in the eyes of the world, our reputation is God's reputation. You or I might be the only representation of Jesus that someone comes in contact with.

There are a myriad of Biblical passages that speak to this. For instance, when the nation of Israel is in exile in the 500's A.D. because they have not been faithful to God, God says through the prophet Ezekiel, **"Therefore say to the Israelites, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: It is not for your sake, people of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord,' declares the Sovereign Lord, 'when I am proved holy through you before their eyes'"** (Ezekiel 36:22-23). Here we see that their poor representation of God led to a poor reputation of God, and now God is saying he's going to fix that through the nation of Israel, through His people - God will be "proved holy through you (Israel, God's people) before their (non-believers) eyes." It's all for what we might call "God's 'reputation'" among the nations - among those who don't follow Him and His ways.

In Romans 2, Paul writes, **"You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."** (Romans 2:21-24). In other words: There were people who professed one thing...who professed good character...but Paul is questioning whether or not they live it out, with the end result being that God's name is blasphemed before the Gentiles.

God's reputation is tarnished in the none-believing world, because of their reputation.

In Titus, we read these verses which are written to people in the church who are helping to disciple and raise up new believers: **“In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned,”** So what we have there is a list of character traits...people of high character engage in these things...and the verse continues, **“...so that those who oppose you [i.e., non-believers] may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us” (Titus 3:6-8).** In other words, the good character traits lead to a good reputation among those who are not believers. We want that good reputation and we should be aware of what our reputation is.

Lastly, I'll point out one thing Jesus says that pertains to this: **“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).** Jesus is saying here that the reason we live rightly - with high character such as love and faithfulness in our Proverbs passage, and in a right relationship with Jesus - is so people would “see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Our character and our reputation matter and both are for the purpose of making God known and that God would have a good reputation...but Jesus makes it clear that even *that* isn't the end goal. He takes it a step further here (and we see this elsewhere - this is not the only place in Scripture this is taught): *it's so that others would glorify God.* This good character and reputation with people is so that they would be attracted to a relationship with God.

And the greatest influence of our reputation is our character - what we believe and value and how we live that out. Without high character, we will never have a good reputation, and therefore as Christ-followers, if we don't live with good character: neither will Jesus have a good reputation. So we

have to start there, with our core values and beliefs and how we live them out. We can't believe one thing and live in a way that's contradictory to that. We see it in these verses we've looked at. Character isn't just about what you believe, it's about how you live out your beliefs - living in such a way that people are attracted to Jesus.

And, as Proverbs 3 highlights, and as Jesus does as well, as Scripture tells us is at the heart of God's very being....love and faithfulness is the key to living with Biblical character and with a good name with God and with people. We want to love God and love people. We want to be faithful to God and faithful to our neighbor. We want to live in such a way that they Jesus' reputation is good and the people around us would be attracted to Him. A good reputation with both God and with people can be done. Scripture tells us to work on both. So I hope this week you are encouraged to live with good character and a good reputation so you'd have God's favor....and also so that you'd have the favor of those around you - not for your benefit, but for the benefit of the name of Jesus, and ultimately for the benefit of those people: so they would know Jesus in their lives. Let's pray...Amen.