

# A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethic

## **Character Matters Leader's Guide**

Welcome to the Character Matters Bible Study. This study is designed to begin a conversation about the role of character and ethics in the life of the Christian. The goal is for students to wrestle with what it means to live their lives faithfully. We pray God will use this study, along with your leadership, to lead people towards a deeper understanding of his will for everyday situations. Together we will dive deep into Scripture, hear a Seminary professor speak on ethics, and have a chance to discuss the most important aspects of life.

## **Materials**

For each week of this course you will need:

- Bible
- Copy of the Weekly Lesson Plan provided in this document
- Enough copies of the Weekly Worksheet for each student
- Computer, with or without projector, to play the Weekly Videos

## **Note to Instructors:**

Our congregations are blessed with trained pastors and teachers; however, the need for education within many congregations is greater than those pastors and teachers can handle alone. And so we often turn to volunteers. We have written the Leader's Guide with this in mind. We made as few assumptions as possible when putting this study together. Because of this, some of you may find a great deal of redundancy in the tips and guides provided. For others, this may be their first time teaching a class. It is hoped that, regardless of previous teaching experience, the notes and tips presented here will be useful.

As you read through the study, you will notice a number of tips and notes provided:

 Time Savers

Each lesson was designed to fill up a typical Bible Study hour. We recognize that in some cases teachers may not have an entire hour. Time savers are suggestions of activities that can be skipped or abbreviated without missing the central point in the lesson.

 Helpful Hints

These are tips and ideas to make the lesson run smoothly.

 Answer Check

Answers are provided for each discussion question. Questions have multiple responses. For that require more personalization questions it is important that you, as the leader, take time to compose your own answers before class.

As you prepare for leading this class, we recommend you take time to work through all the material beforehand. You may find it helpful to purchase a copy of Dr. Biermann's book *A Case for Character* in order go a little deeper into the material.

Each week you should plan on arriving to class early. It is worth taking the time to do one more check of the video before students arrive. It's not unusual to have equipment moved, or settings changed between the last time you used the equipment and the time of your class.

May God richly bless you as you study and strive to be people after "God's own heart."

# Lesson 1: CHARACTER DEFINED

## Materials

- Extra Bibles
- Writing Utensils
- Week 1 Worksheet
- Video Equipment

## Lesson at a Glance:

- Introduction (15 min)
- Video (20 min)
- Discussion (20 min)

## Before Class:

- Arrange the classroom
- Test video equipment
- Ensure you have all needed materials



*Warmly greet people as they arrive. Being the first one to speak and make conversation with people is a good way to make them feel comfortable. Conversation does not have to be about the Bible Study; the goal is to make the people and yourself feel more comfortable.*

## Introduction (15 min): David, a man after God's own heart?

### Opening Prayer:

### Opening Activity:



Depending on the time allotted there are two ways to go through this activity:

1. If your class has time, have the group look up the Scripture passages together.
2. If time is limited, the leader can read the section aloud.

Throughout Scripture, David is held up as a “man after God's own heart.” God is continuously lifting up David as the example to be followed for the kings that come after him. Take for example God's words to Solomon in 1 Kings 9:4:

*4 And as for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my rules,*

Or God's words to Jeroboam in 1 Kings 14:7-8:

*7 Go, tell Jeroboam, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: “Because I exalted you from among the people and made you leader over my people Israel 8 and tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you, and yet you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only that which was right in my eyes,*

Even the New Testament holds up David's character as an example to be followed:

*22 And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' 23 Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised (Acts 13:22-23).*

Truly, if ever there were a man whose character we could say was godly, it would have to be David. Because, as 1 Kings 15:5 tells us:

*5 David did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.*

“Except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.” And therein lies the problem. As those familiar with the biblical narrative, we know the stories of David's triumphs, but we also know the stories of his failures. And there is one failure in particular that stands out above all others, “the matter of Uriah the Hittite,” a story popularly known as the story of David and Bathsheba. This raises some basic questions for us. How can David really be considered a man after God's own heart when he has done something like that? If he is a godly man, then what does it mean to be godly?

### Video: Character Defined

Watch Video “Character Defined”

### Reflect:



Questions in the reflect section tend to be more direct. If time is short consider talking through these questions for the class, leaving more time for the Consider section. Questions in the Consider section concern application and require more processing from the class.

Have someone read 1 Samuel 24 and then discuss the following questions with your group.

1. How does David handle his days on the run from Saul? What does the story in 1 Samuel 24 reveal about David's character?

David is remarkably patient in waiting for God to unfold his plan. He knows that God is in control and that Saul is king until God removes him from office. Even causing Saul some embarrassment stings David's conscience. The issue is not Saul, but David's trust of God.

2. Considering David's propensity for serious moral blunders (what were some of these?) why would God call David, “a man after God's own heart?”

David kills Nabal, steals Bathsheba, kills Uriah, takes a census against God's will, and fails to intervene when his sons have serious moral failures; but he is God's man because he knows where he stands before God and when convicted of sin pleads for God's grace.

3. Based on what you know of David, what judgment would you make of his character?

He seems rash, impulsive, negligent, and belligerent—but also committed to trusting God and following God's plan in spite of his many failings. Character is not a matter of perfection, and one cannot judge a man's character only on what can be seen.

### Consider:

1. Describe a person in your life whom you consider to have exceptional character. How do you know when a person has good character?

Integrity and consistency—one who keeps promises and follows through on what is expected, trusting God, are marks of good character.

2. What are some of the things that can form a person's character whether for good or for ill? Why is it that the same event can build one person's character in a positive way, while another person can be negatively affected?

Experiences in childhood—with peers, education, examples of heroes, stories, and movies—teach and shape us. Personality, spirituality, and morality—all are formed by the way a person is taught to see life. Childhood is critical but formation does not end at adolescence or age 30, 60, or 90!

3. What is one thing you could do differently this week in light of what you have learned?

A conscious effort to notice and intentionally pursue those ways of thinking and acting that more nearly reflect God's will and the character of one who trusts God would be one possible goal.

### Closing Prayer:

Heavenly Father, you richly and daily bless us, not because of anything we have done but because you are gracious. We thank you for all your good gifts and especially for this time gathered together learning more about you. Like David, help us to be people after your own heart so we may live according to your will. Grant this for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

### Further Study:

- *A Case for Character*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 1-27
- *Courageous Fathers of the Bible: A Bible Study for Men*, by Joel D. Biermann, starting on page 53

## Lesson 2: JUSTIFICATION AND CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

### Materials

- Extra Bibles
- Writing Utensils
- Week 2 Worksheet
- Video Equipment

### Lesson at a Glance:

- Introduction (15 min)
- Video (20 min)
- Discussion (20 min)

### Before Class:

- Arrange the classroom
- Test video equipment
- Ensure you have all needed materials

## Introduction (15 min): Paul

### Opening Prayer:

 As you begin this week, be aware that you may have students who missed the first week. Take a moment to reintroduce yourself and the course. Give a brief overview of the material covered in week 1. If you have time, encourage students to summarize week 1 concepts. This will give you the opportunity to assess how well they remember and understand what was covered.

### Opening Activity:

 Depending on the time allotted there are two ways to go through this activity:

1. If your class has time, have the group look up the Scripture passages together.
2. If time is limited, the leader can read the section aloud.

Perhaps no one has expressed his or her dependence on justification through faith alone quite as clearly as the Apostle Paul:

*9 For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:9-10).*

Paul had walked the path of earning one's righteousness, had even excelled at it, only to find that it was meaningless, all "rubbish."

*If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Philippians 3:4-6).*

Ultimately, Paul saw there was nothing that could be done to earn righteousness.

*8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).*

And yet, for all of this, Paul had no problem with exhorting people to live righteously.

*3 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on Earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:1-17).

Such language can be found in most, if not all, of Paul's writings. How does one reconcile these seemingly disparate thoughts? If justification gives us a new identity how can Paul talk about character at all? What does this mean for how we understand our identity? What does this mean for character formation?

Spend 5 minutes discussing these questions with your class.

### **Video: Justification and Christian Character**

Watch video "Justification and Christian Character"

### **Reflect:**

1. Consider the account of Paul's conversion. What role did Paul play? What sort of impact did Paul's conversion have on his identity and character?

Paul did nothing except get knocked off his horse. God's action in Paul's life changed him profoundly—yet he was still Saul/Paul, he brought what he was into his new identity in Christ, and God used and transformed even this to make Paul into his apostle.

2. While any attempt to win God's favor or earn his blessing is a form of works righteousness, not all striving for growth in piety and good works is wrong. How does Paul make this especially clear in Colossians 3?

Paul anticipates people working and striving to accomplish the things he details—it is not a matter of "wait and see if the Holy Spirit works these traits in you!"

3. Read Romans 5:1-5 in your group. Is this progression described by Paul something that God does to the believer, or something that happens as the believer endeavors to grow in the practice of holiness (i.e., virtues)? What in the passage makes you say this?

The best answer is that both the believer and the Holy Spirit are at work, yet even the striving of the Christian is ultimately tied to the work of the Spirit.

### **Consider:**

1. Think about an adult who is new to the Christian faith. How does such a person typically act? Why is that?

New believers are usually altogether motivated to grow in their knowledge of God and training in discipleship—the sheer wonder of the gospel gift blows them away and prompts an eagerness for more of God’s truth.

2. What attitudes and actions might result if a person was convinced that only what God did (the gospel) could shape his identity and character?

While it might prompt a commendable trust of God and humble reliance on him, it might also breed apathy, laziness, and indifference to growth in piety.

3. How does one continue to trust in Christ alone and also work hard every day at becoming the sort of person that God desires—and that Paul describes and encourages?

This is simply and profoundly the heart of Christian faith and living. Christians in fact, do both all the time. It is a tension at the core of our confession: God does it all alone, and I must strive to be all that God created me to be.

4. What is one thing you could do differently this week in light of what you have learned?

One thing would be to choose one or two items in the Colossians 3 list and make conscious and deliberate efforts to learn and practice them more fully.

### **Closing Prayer:**

Almighty God, through the waters of Holy Baptism you have given us a new identity as children in your family. Therefore, we ask you as children ask their father, to grant us good character and a virtuous heart as we live lives of service to our neighbor. Make us instruments that daily reflect your will. We ask this for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.

**Further Study:**

- *A Case for Character*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 39-63

## Lesson 3: MORE THAN LAW AND GOSPEL

### Materials

- Extra Bibles
- Writing Utensils
- Week 3 Worksheet
- Video Equipment

### Lesson at a Glance:

- Introduction (15 min)
- Video (20 min)
- Discussion (20 min)

### Before Class:

- Arrange the classroom
- Test video equipment
- Ensure you have all needed materials

## Introduction (15 min): Peter

### Opening Prayer:

 As you begin this week, be aware that you may have students who missed the first two weeks. Take a moment to reintroduce yourself and the course. Give a brief overview of the material covered. Encourage students to summarize the main concepts. This will give you the opportunity to assess how well they remember and understand what was covered.

### Opening Activity:

 Depending on the time allotted there are two ways to go through this activity:

1. If your class has time, have the group look up the Scripture passages together.
2. If time is limited, the leader can read the section aloud.

Law and Gospel. For centuries these words have been a Lutheran mantra. And with them comes the certainty that: The Law kills, the Gospel raises to life. The Law condemns, the Gospel saves. The Law ferrets out our sin, reveals it to us, and drives us to the cross of Christ seeking repentance. And while this is at the heart of our new identity as baptized children of God, as we read scripture, we find ourselves wondering, is this all the Law does?

We turn to the Gospel of John and find Peter. He who betrayed Jesus now finds himself sitting on a sandy seashore eating breakfast with a man who is not dead, who is more alive than even before, who is man—and God.

*15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." 16 He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. 18 Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." 19 (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me." (John 21:19-15).*

Reading those words, we rejoice at the restoration of Peter, but we pause as well. What do we do with Jesus's words? Are they law? Is the call to "tend my sheep" a call to repentance? Is all law condemning in the life of the believer?

Peter's ministry only heightens this tension. He begins his Epistle firmly establishing the certainty of our identity in Christ.

*3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:3-5).*

And then, just a few verses later, he exhorts his readers to live holy lives.

*13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." 17 And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of our exiles, 18 knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. (1 Peter 1:13-16).*

All this leads us to ask, is there something more than Law and Gospel?

### **Video: More than Law and Gospel"**

Watch "More than Law and Gospel"

### **Reflect:**

1. In John 21 we are told about Jesus's restoration of his humiliated and fallen disciple who had once been so bold and confident. How does this story reflect the heart of the gospel? How does this story show an element of law that is more than conviction?

Jesus's action restoring Peter is pure Gospel—he does not deserve such grace. The command to tend the sheep is a clear direction for Peter's future life and activity—it's something Peter is to do: it's law.

2. How does Peter describe the reality of the gospel in chapter one? Are verses 13-16 of chapter one law or gospel? Explain.

Peter makes it clear that God takes the initiative and makes us who we are in Christ. Yet later in the chapter Peter provides explicit direction on the sort of people Christians are supposed to be—something that is the responsibility of the believer. They are clearly law.

3. What does Peter expect of those who call themselves Christian? How would both truths of chapter 1 impact a person's character?

Christians are to believe and act like Christians! Knowing our identity in Christ, and knowing what God calls us to do and be, impact the way that we Christians live and think by teaching us who Christ is and setting before us a goal and picture of what it looks like to live in Christ.

4. Read 1 Peter 2:9-17 and show how this applies to you.

Living as God's people should make us different from other people. As our surrounding culture increasingly defies God's will and standards for his creatures, we should expect the divergence between Christians and the rest of society to become ever more apparent.

5. In what way is the pattern established in chapter 1 at work again in the section from chapter 2? How specific is Peter's list of prescribed behavior? Why is Peter so concerned that his readers adopt these behaviors?

First, Peter points the readers to their identity, and then he spells out what it looks like to live as those people. Considering his context, he offers particular guidance about obeying a godless government, and also general direction about the right way to think about freedom. The point is that if believers look like the rest of the world then the proclamation of the gospel will be blunted, and the spread of the kingdom of God hindered. Christians need to live and look like the people that God has made them.

6. Peter himself continued to struggle with issues of character. What does his stumble in Antioch (Galatians 2:10-12) teach us about the ongoing work of learning to think and act with character?

We are always in process—this is a simple factor of being at once saint and sinner. And, even those who have strongly developed traits of God-pleasing character continue to be formed and shaped more fully into being the true humans they were created to be. This side of the resurrection, the work continues.

### **Consider:**

1. How do you experience law in your daily life?

In a Lutheran context, it is not unusual for people to have a negative reaction to the law. Many people assume that it is a bad thing from which they are freed by the Gospel. The point of this study is to help people adopt a more positive and eager attitude to the law as God's will for his creation.

2. Examine your own life in light of the readings from 1 Peter. How does it compare?

At this stage of the class, a bit of critical self-reflection is in order. Encourage the members of the class to assess themselves, but more importantly to identify the areas that pose the most trouble for them.

3. What is one thing you could do differently this week in light of what you have learned?

Building on the previous question, direct the participants to consider how they might make a commitment to more intentionally strive to practice one of the character traits highlighted by Peter.

### **Closing Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, you have come as our gospel and given us a right relationship with God the Father. Form in us good habits so we may live lives that please you in all we do. Forgive our habits when they do not reflect your will for our lives. We pray in your name. Amen.

### **Further Study:**

- *A Case for Character*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 105-133
- *The Quest for Holiness*, by Adolf Köberle, pages 137-205
- *Courageous Fathers of the Bible: A Bible Study for Men*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 107-113

## Lesson 4: THE FORMATION OF CHARACTER

### Materials

- Extra Bibles
- Writing Utensils
- Week 4 Worksheet
- Video Equipment
- Copies of the Large Catechism (or alternatively photocopies of paragraphs 69-77 of the Second Commandment in the Large Catechism).

### Lesson at a Glance:

- Introduction (15 min)
- Video (20 min)
- Discussion (20 min)

### Before Class:

- Arrange the classroom
- Test video equipment
- Ensure you have all needed materials

## Introduction (15 min): Timothy

### Opening Prayer:

 Give a brief overview of the material covered in previous weeks. Engage as many of the students as you can in summarizing the main concepts. This will give you the opportunity to assess how well they remember and understand what was covered.

### Opening Activity:

 Depending on the time allotted there are two ways to go through this activity:

1. If your class has time, have the group look up the Scripture passages together.
2. If time is limited, the leader can read the section aloud.

Character formation is not something one can choose to do or not do. The reality is that character is being formed simply by living within the culture. The way friends, family, work, media, advertising, art, literature, and music shape a person's character is far more profound than most people realize. Every person's character is constantly in the process of being formed . . . for good or for ill. This is particularly true of young people who without well-established ways of thinking and acting (character) are more affected by the influences they encounter each day.

For the Christian, the point is to acknowledge and respond to this truth in ways that are wise and proactive—for the sake of your own character as well as for the sake of those for whom you are responsible. Consider the example of Timothy being formed by Lois and Eunice.

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus, 2 To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. 3 I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. 4 As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. 5 I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. 6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, 7 for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control (2 Timothy 2:1-7).*

Or consider the Wisdom literature where God shows us how important the role of character formation is:

*6 Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it (Proverbs 22:6).*

Again we see in the New Testament that God desires good formation of character:

*32 What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." 33 Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."34 Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame (1 Corinthians 15:32-34).*

The scriptural record is littered with narratives that illustrate the power and the importance of character formation. Sometimes the examples are to be emulated—the influence of Abraham on Isaac or of Jesus on the twelve. Other times, the example is decidedly negative—David's failure to shape Absalom and even Solomon, Jacob's mishandling of his favoritism for his youngest son. Paul's acknowledgment of the impact of Timothy's upbringing serves as a particularly compelling illustration of the significance of character formation that goes beyond “teaching truths,” and finally shapes hearts and minds and lives.

### **Video: The Formation of Character**

Watch “The Formation of Character”

### **Reflect:**

1. Think about an event or occasion that had a significant impact on the way you think and act. What made this a milestone in your formation?

Such events may have been those designed to foster such pivotal experiences—youth retreats, family vacations, or confirmation services. But, there are many mundane things that can become critical points of formation. Of course, most likely of all, not a single event, but a series of interactions with a parent, teacher, or other mentor may come to mind.

2. Paul applauds the faith of Lois and Eunice, and by implication, commends their work of forming that same faith in Timothy. We aren't told how they did this, but from your own experience what sort of things would Timothy's mother and grandmother have done to ensure that Timothy was formed into the faith?

This question should foster discussion that will reflect the upbringing and experiences (good or bad) of the participants. Help direct the conversation so that many possibilities are explored.

3. Proverbs 22:6 is treated by some Christians as a solemn promise from God. In reality, it is better seen as a statement of truth about the power for formation. Have you seen evidence of the truth of the Proverb? Does the Proverb foster feelings of hope and confidence, or does it provoke concern and then conviction?

Most people have probably noticed that good parents tend to produce good kids. Of course, what defines “good” is critically important. Integrity and consistency head the list of essential parenting virtues. Personal reflection may cause some concern from honest parents, and offer opportunity for the reassuring words of Christ’s grace and forgiveness.

### **Consider:**

1. According to what has been considered so far, is exemplary Christian character an automatic outcome of the Gospel at work, or is it gained through intentional and careful training and cultivation of behavior? Read the Large Catechism’s teaching on the second commandment paragraphs 69-77. Which way of thinking is in evidence here?

Yes, the Gospel provokes much delightful fruit and prompts wonderful character; but it does not discount the place and value of careful and intentional formation of character. Scripture and the Confessions operate with an acknowledgement of both.

2. What are some of the significant influences in the lives of Christians (especially young believers)? What should the church be doing to take seriously the task of forming its people into people of character?

All the usual suspects should be mentioned: school, friends, internet, media, music, movies, and so on. This question is meant to prompt serious thinking about what the church can and should do besides merely bemoaning the decadence of the culture and the pull of that culture on its own young people. Deliberate intergenerational conversations and services is one possible suggestion.

3. How will what you have learned in this lesson make a difference for how you live in the week ahead? What will you do?

Perhaps it is time for the group to take concrete action and implement one of the ideas about how the church might more effectively shape character in its people. Of course, individual plans of personal action should also be chosen and put into action.

**Closing Prayer:**

Merciful Father, you provide us with all we need to take care of our body and soul. We thank you for preserving us throughout our days of pilgrimage here on Earth by giving us everything we need including other Christians. Today, we especially thank you for those you put in our lives to form us in the faith. Thank you for their diligence and faithfulness. Use us in our various callings to faithfully pass this gift on. We ask this in Jesus's name. Amen.

**Further Study:**

- *A Case for Character*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 165-199
- *Courageous Fathers of the Bible: A Bible Study for Men*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 26-51

## Lesson 5: THE REASON FOR CHARACTER

### Materials

- Extra Bibles
- Writing Utensils
- Week 5 Worksheet
- Video Equipment

### Lesson at a Glance:

- Introduction (15 min)
- Video (20 min)
- Discussion (20 min)

### Before Class:

- Arrange the classroom
- Test video equipment
- Ensure you have all needed materials

## Introduction: The First Adam through the Second

### Opening Prayer:

 Give a brief overview of the material covered in previous weeks. Engage as many of the students as you can in summarizing the main concepts. This will give you the opportunity to assess how well they remember and understand what was covered.

### Opening Activity:

 Depending on the time allotted there are two ways to go through this activity:

1. If your class has time, have the group look up the Scripture passages together.
2. If time is limited, the leader can read the section aloud.

God created us with a specific purpose. We were made to be responsible for the entire creation. To carry out this demanding work, God equipped Adam and Eve with all that they would need.

*26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth (Genesis 1:26-28)."*

Of course, sin perverted God's beautiful design and severely diminished our abilities and spoiled the gifts he had given us. To provide for his people God sends helpers into his church:

*11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:11-16).*

These helpers bear the message of God's good news in Christ Jesus:

*14 And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. 20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:14-20).*

In response to this message we are able to face all the corruption of sin, death, and devil:

*24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, 25 of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26 the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me (Colossians 1:24-29).*

We faithfully strive to endure the challenges we will face, and honor our Lord by embracing his example:

*20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth (1 Peter 2:20-22).*

## **Video: The Reason for Character**

Watch "The Reason for Character"

### **Reflect:**

1. How would most people you know answer the question, "What's the point of your life?" How would you answer that question?

Common answers in the West include family, making a "difference" for the world or "being happy." Having and remembering the answer to this question is crucial for a life that has meaning and that accomplishes the Creator's will.

2. What does God's charge to his new creation (Genesis 1) teach us about our reason for being?

The "First Great Commission" gave Adam and Eve clear direction and purpose for their lives. They were placed in the Garden to watch over all of creation as God's caretakers. This mandate has never been lifted or changed, indicating that our purpose for being must always be grounded in and centered on the created world around us. This is one reason that understanding vocation is so important. One lives for the sake of others.

3. Adam failed to be all God intended; but Christ fulfilled the plan. In what ways does Jesus as the "second Adam" shape your life and daily routines? What difference should this make for the way that you live in your daily routines (vocation)?

Jesus is the new Adam. He did what Adam did not do. His example of living quietly for 30 years simply doing what he had been given to do by virtue of his place in the world (the essence of vocation) is important. And even in his vocation of teacher/Messiah it is important to note that his focus was always on others and the ways that he could care well for them. Living like Jesus does not send us to a monastery or a church, it sends us to the side of our neighbor with God's truth and grace.

4. What goal or purpose did St. Paul have for the work that he did (Ephesians 4:13 and Colossians 1:28). What does it look like when a person reaches this completion?

The goal is to be all that God created us to be: fully human. The one perfect example we have of this is Jesus, who was the ideal human. When we reach maturity, we look like Jesus. This goal will only be gained at the resurrection, and can only be pursued with the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Consider:**

1. We are often taught that Jesus is our savior, but Scripture also makes clear that Jesus is our example (1 Peter 2:21). What examples set by Jesus do you find especially challenging? How would practicing these shape your character?

Jesus's compassion came with a concrete commitment to real people and their real needs. Dealing with given situations is always more difficult than hypothetical ideas. Presumably, group members should have little trouble finding admonitions and examples of Jesus that challenge them. The big point is that actually choosing and doing the thing that does not come easily or naturally is probably the best way to learn and own that behavior or trait. To be like Jesus, you follow Jesus, and act as he did even when you'd rather not, and even when your heart is not in it.

2. Different vocations have different tasks; with this in mind, are there any limits on using Jesus as an example?

Yes, certainly! Jesus had the vocation of Messiah; none of us has that calling. So, instead of asking, “What would Jesus do?” consider asking, “What would Jesus have me do in this situation?” The example of Jesus shows us what it looks like to be wholly submissive to God and his will, but does not prescribe a script for every situation a person might face.

3. How will what you have learned in this lesson make a difference for how you live in the week ahead? What will you do?

As always, the desire is that the study is not an end in itself, but a means to increased conformity to Christ. This only happens when steps are taken, behaviors pursued, habits practiced, and virtues embraced. All of this takes time and effort—and all of this is driven and directed by the Holy Spirit.

### **Closing Prayer:**

Almighty and everlasting God, you have freed us from sin, death, and the devil. Grant that we work in our vocations faithfully, eagerly awaiting the day when you will restore your creation. We entrust our whole lives to you as we follow in your will. Hear our prayer for the sake of Jesus. Amen.

### **Further Study:**

- *A Case for Character*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 135-163

## Case for Character Weekly Handouts



**Consider:**

1. Describe a person in your life whom you consider to have exceptional character. How do you know when a person has good character?
  
2. What are some of the things that can form a person's character whether for good or for ill? Why is it that the same event can build one person's character in a positive way, while another person can be negatively affected?
  
3. What is one thing you could do differently this week in light of what you have learned?

**For Further Study:**

- Read *A Case for Character*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 1-27
- Read *Courageous Fathers of the Bible: A Bible Study for Men*, by Joel D. Biermann, starting on page 53

## Week 2: Justification and Christian Character

### Reflect:

1. Consider the account of Paul's conversion. What role did Paul play? What sort of impact did Paul's conversion have on his identity and character?
2. While any attempt to win God's favor or earn his blessing is a form of works righteousness, not all striving for growth in piety and good works is wrong. How does Paul make this especially clear in Colossians 3?
3. Read Romans 5:1-5 in your group. Is this progression described by Paul something that God does to the believer, or something that happens as the believer endeavors to grow in the practice of holiness (i.e., virtues)? What in the passage makes you say this?

**Consider:**

1. Think about an adult who is new to the Christian faith. How does such a person typically act? Why is that?
2. What attitudes and actions might result if a person was convinced that only what God did (the gospel) could shape his identity and character?
3. How does one continue to trust in Christ alone and also work hard every day at becoming the sort of person that God desires—and that Paul describes and encourages?
4. What is one thing you could do differently this week in light of what you have learned?

**Further Study:**

- Read *A Case for Character*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 39-63

## Week 3: More than Law and Gospel

### Reflect:

1. In John 21 we are told about Jesus's restoration of his humiliated and fallen disciple who had once been so bold and confident. How does this story reflect the heart of the gospel? How does this story show an element of law that is more than conviction?
2. How does Peter describe the reality of the gospel in chapter one? Are verses 13-16 of chapter one law or gospel? Explain.
3. What does Peter expect of those who call themselves Christian? How would both truths of chapter 1 impact a person's character?
4. Read 1 Peter 2:9-17 and show how this applies to you.
5. In what way is the pattern established in chapter 1 at work again in the section from chapter 2? How specific is Peter's list of prescribed behavior? Why is Peter so concerned that his readers adopt these behaviors?
6. Peter himself continued to struggle with issues of character. What does his stumble in Antioch (Galatians 2:10-12) teach us about the ongoing work of learning to think and act with character?





### Consider:

1. According to what has been considered so far, is exemplary Christian character an automatic outcome of the Gospel at work, or is it gained through intentional and careful training and cultivation of behavior? Read the Large Catechism's teaching on the second commandment paragraphs 69-77. Which way of thinking is in evidence here?
2. What are some of the significant influences in the lives of Christians (especially young believers)? What should the church be doing to take seriously the task of forming its people into people of character?
3. How will what you have learned in this lesson make a difference for how you live in the week ahead? What will you do?

### Further Study:

- Read *A Case for Character*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 165-199
- Read *Courageous Fathers of the Bible: A Bible Study for Men*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 26-51

## Week 5: The Reason for Character

### Reflect:

1. How would most people you know answer the question, "What's the point of your life?" How would you answer that question?
2. What does God's charge to his new creation (Genesis 1) teach us about our reason for being?
3. Adam failed to be all God intended; but Christ fulfilled the plan. In what ways does Jesus as the "second Adam" shape your life and daily routines? What difference should this make for the way that you live in your daily routines (vocation)?
4. What goal or purpose did St. Paul have for the work that he did (Ephesians 4:13 and Colossians 1:28). What does it look like when a person reaches this completion?

**Consider:**

1. We are often taught that Jesus is our savior, but Scripture also makes clear that Jesus is our example (1 Peter 2:21). What examples set by Jesus do you find especially challenging? How would practicing these shape your character?
2. Different vocations have different tasks; with this in mind, are there any limits on using Jesus as an example?
3. How will what you have learned in this lesson make a difference for how you live in the week ahead? What will you do?

**Further Study:**

- Read *A Case for Character*, by Joel D. Biermann, pages 135-163