

Foundation

Advanced

Character

Bible & Doctrine

Church

World

Gospel Living



Porterbrook
Network

Unit 1.

A life for God

This module on character is the central building block of this course. It often gets overlooked, but character is the key issue in Christian ministry. Although more emphasis is placed on ‘charisma’ or gifting, character is the key issue in discipleship.

Every aspect of my life is to be lived for God's glory

This first principle is stated clearly and unambiguously in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (cf. Romans 12:1; Philippians 1:27) A key theme throughout the letter of 1 Corinthians is the nature of true spirituality (see the commentary by Gordon Fee); chapters 8–10 form a distinct section in keeping with that theme. In chapter 8 Paul addresses the presenting issue of food sacrificed to idols and several underlying issues: people’s preoccupation with themselves, their freedom, and the impact it has on others (verse 11). In chapter 9, Paul gives himself as an example of the right use of liberty (verse 19). He sees himself as being completely free; the only thing to enslave him is the need to see others won for Christ (verses 22–23). In chapter 10, Paul encourages them to avoid Israel’s mistakes and addresses the issue of temple worship. He then provides a comprehensive summary of all that he has said (10:31–11:1): God is glorified when I live my life for other people because only God can produce this kind of work in us.

At first reading, this principle may appear something of a no-brainer. However, if taken seriously, we will find that no other principle is quite so counter-cultural and counter-intuitive as this one. What this principle does is it starts with God; it defines *me* in relation to *him*. It says that *me* and *my life* is all about *him*. It is only about *me* to the extent that I relate to *him*. That puts

me well and truly in my place. Of course, the gospel assures us that there is no better place to be, but my ego kicks and screams when it is put there.

In Romans 9 for example, Paul raises the difficult issue of predestination. He spends the early part of the chapter simply articulating and stating the issue and then anticipates an objection in verse 19. Paul never seeks to answer that charge; instead he asks, “Who are you, O man, to talk back to God?” (verse 20) The reason that Paul can have such a radical and almost dismissive approach to what is a difficult issue for many people is simply because he always starts with God. He never has to defend or justify God. If you start with God then there is no issue, because God will do what God will do. If you start with me, then God is always in the dock.

What is radical about this elementary truth is that it contradicts everything I have been taught and everything I have wanted to believe. I am the centre of my universe, and see everything and everyone from my perspective. Therefore my instinct, if I think about God at all, it is to think of and define *him* in relation to *me*. For example, God is just if *I* can be persuaded of his justice; God is love if he expresses it in ways acceptable to *me*. The net result of this is that God is daily brought to the bar of human reason and prejudice and made to answer for his supposed crimes and misdemeanours.

By starting with God’s glory, *he* is then the reference point. I only understand justice and love in relationship to him. If my life is to be lived for his glory, then I no longer occupy that pivotal and defining place in the great scheme of things. Believe me when I say that there are few things quite so liberating as realising that! If my life is all about his glory, then that becomes the great, unchangeable principle against which everything is measured and assessed.

So what does it mean for God to be glorified by my life?

The person I am, the life I live, and the things I do must all commend God to others — both people and angels (Ephesians 3:10). It means I am a trophy of his grace: there is no other explanation for who I am and how I live except the sovereign and supernatural work of the triune God. All this means that a life lived for God’s glory is a truly extraordinary life. It is also a life that anticipates eternity!

Imagine the moment of your arrival in heaven. All the angels are lined up to welcome you, and all the saints who have gone before you are ready to cheer as you walk through the gates. Those who know you have got front-row seats, and you instantly recognise their faces, though they are all much more attractive than you remember. The noise is deafening and the sense of coming home is almost too much to bear. At first you think that they are there for you, and in a sense they are. But then you realise that no one is patting you on the back and saying “Well done”. Not one word of congratulation is spoken. All the cheers are for God! All the praise is directed at him for his magnificent work of taking a broken specimen of humanity

and transforming her into a stunning and breathtaking example of what grace can do. Just as no one stands in a gallery and praises the canvas or the paint and says, “What a fine work of art you are!”, so no-one in heaven will look at me and praise me for what a fine job I have made of my life. It is the artist who is applauded, as it is God who is praised.

Jesus put it this way: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16) Paul made the same point when he wrote: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10) If that image is what eternity will be like, then that is how we are to live now, in anticipation of eternity. Our life and our communities are meant to be eschatological lives and communities in the sense that we point to and anticipate that age to come. Our life as a community is to be the place where God is glorified. My life is to be of such a calibre that only grace can produce it, and so only God receives the glory.

Anyone can love his friends; only grace can produce someone who truly loves his enemies and seeks their good so that God gets all the honour. Anyone can forgive one act of betrayal; only grace can produce someone who goes on forgiving time after time so that God gets all the honour. Anyone can dip into her purse and give coins to a beggar; only grace can produce someone who sells all her possessions and give the proceeds to the poor so that God gets all the honour. Anyone can expend himself on behalf of his wife; only grace can produce a husband and wife who open their homes to the destitute and oppressed so that God gets all the honour.

I wonder if we actually appreciate the magnitude of this principle. To live life to the glory of God is to be God-like, because he too does all things for his own glory. God is obsessed with his own glory, which is altogether reasonable because he is altogether glorious and incomparable.

On the basis of Ephesians 1, especially verses 5-6, 12 and 14, John Piper says this:

All the different ways God has chosen to display his glory in creation and redemption seem to reach their culmination in the praises of his redeemed people. God governs the world with glory precisely that he might be admired, marvelled at, exalted and praised. The climax of his happiness is the delight he takes in the echoes of his excellence in the praises of the saints.¹

God’s love is expressed in his pursuit of sinners so that they too might know him as the Altogether Lovely One, and desire his glory, honour and reputation above anything and everything else.

In a sense, the principle as stated almost undersells the issue. Not only should every aspect of my life be lived for the glory of God; I should live my life with a radical and determined intentionality that ensures that every aspect of it honours the God who made and saved me. We need to lead a thought-full life. All too often our actions and words are thoughtless of God. In my

¹ *The Happiness of God*, online at http://www.desiringgod.org/dg/id6_cf.htm

church, we sometimes speak of ‘gospel intentionality’. There needs to also be a ‘glory intentionality’ in everything we do: *How is this going to glorify God?* That would have a massive impact upon us. When we are thoughtless of God, the end result is selfishness, brokenness, sin.

When my wife and I are in the middle of an argument, I should be thinking: *How is this going to glorify God?* If God and his glory were at the forefront of our mind and our vision, then that would temper every argument I had with my wife or anyone else.

When I am responding to criticism: *How is this going to glorify God?*

When I am making decisions: *How is this going to glorify God?*

When I am disciplining my children: *How is this going to glorify God?*

When I am playing football: *How is this going to glorify God?*

There is no aspect of my life where I should not be thoughtful of this issue and intentionally asking this question. As the Romans used to say, “Soli Deo Gloria!”