

IT HAS TO DO WITH CHARACTER

by Tom Wacaster

Your greatest opportunity and responsibility is not so much the making of a living as it is the making of a life. Whatever else one may accomplish in life, you have failed if you do not make your's an honorable, useful, trustworthy life. Horace Greely is reported to have exclaimed, "Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, riches take wings, those who cheer today will curse tomorrow. Only one thing endures. Character." In commenting on Mr. Greely's statement, the late Dr. Newell Dwight Hillis wrote, "These weighty words bid us all remember that Life's one task is the making of manhood. Our world is a College, events are teachers, happiness is the graduating point, and character is the diploma which God gives man."

It would be grand to live in a world in which all men recognize the importance of character and then make an honest pursuit of the same, beginning with our leaders and flowing down to the common man on the street. Unfortunately this honorable trait called "character" has fallen upon hard times. Apathy with respect to such things as integrity, honesty, and character has infected a rather large percentage of the nation. When we add to this the abysmal ignorance with regard to its essential contribution to a stable society, we begin to understand why the call for honesty and integrity on the part of those who would lead us into the next century falls largely on deaf ears. If polls come anywhere near reflecting this nation's attitude toward the importance of character in her leaders, then it is much later than we think. A CNN poll some years ago revealed that 70% of Americans do not think that character should be an issue in political elections.

I submit to you that character IS important. It is important for our very existence, yea our survival. If history teaches us anything it is this: absence of character among any people spells disaster and ruin. When a people throw off moral character and integrity there is nothing left to hold them together. Try to imagine a society in which lies were accepted, where promises meant nothing, and where dishonest and unethical business dealings were the norm. No man, not even the liar and the thief, would want to live in such a place. The problem of crime and violence in our society are not economic. It is a problem of an absence of character and moral integrity. Washington continues to crank out anti-crime bills, each one tougher than the previous, and yet our crime rate (with the exception of an occasional drop) continues to escalate.

A number of years ago producer Norman Lear made this observation: "At no time in my life has our culture been so estranged from spiritual values. Our problems lie beyond the reach of politics alone." Perhaps it is time for every single American to pay closer attention to the words of the Psalmist: "Blessed is the nation whose God is Jehovah, The people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance" (Psalms 33:12). Let us dust off our Bibles and read again the words of Solomon: "Righteousness exalteth a nation; But sin is a reproach to any people" (Proverbs 14:34). It has been said that no institution can rise any higher than its leaders. The same is true with regard to nations. If our leaders are not willing to exercise moral restraint, how can we expect any less from the citizens? It would seem, as per the poll previously mentioned, that we no longer expect our leaders to demonstrate genuine character, and worse yet, we don't care.

Perhaps the most frightening aspect about our present lack of concern with regard to character on the part of our leaders is the fact that such is actually a reflection of what we expect of ourselves. Charles Colson, close associate of President Richard Nixon, pinpointed the problem a number of years ago when he wrote that the most terrifying thing that can happen to a society is the death of conscience in its young people. The new century lies just around the corner. The future depends largely upon the present. Where we want to be in the year 2000 (or beyond) will be determined by the choices we make today. And, yes, much more than we think, or perhaps care to admit, "it has to do with character."