

Developing Character

By: Sally Hohnberger

*“Whereof I am made a . . .
[ministering parent], according to the
gift of the grace of God given to me by the
effectual working of His power”
—Ephesians 3:7—*

“But, Mother, I try and try not to be foolish, but it doesn’t work,” Matthew responded.

“Me, too. I’ve tried and tried to not be slothful, and I still am,” Andrew said in frustration. “I want to be diligent, but it is so hard.”

“To develop the right character—the right thoughts and feelings—we need to be ever communicating with Jesus to know His will, and always cooperating with what He is putting in our minds and hearts to do,” I responded.

“Now this crosses the big self in us. It is not natural or easy, but it is beneficial when we follow God’s way over self’s way. We must come to see that doing right in self’s power is not good

enough—this is why we fail. Every effort, in self, must fail. Our failure needs to be our motivator to reach out to God and find a different way to change that is effective. We must learn to do the right in Jesus’ power while we cooperate by doing all we can do. Learning to be the branch connected to the vine is what we need to learn the most,” I added.

“We don’t get it!” they responded.

I was tempted to be upset and angry at their childish response. Hadn’t I told them this many times? But instead, I chose to turn to God for wisdom and strength to be the parent He wants me to be and to respond in a way worthy of imitation.

“First you need to have personal worship time with God to learn by experience how to talk with Him and how He talks with you in the Scriptures—to your conscience and your reason. Second, you need to be willing in mind, heart, and muscle to cooperate when Jesus asks you to do

something differently than you are use to doing. And third, do it depending upon Jesus' strength and wisdom to perform a change on the inside while you cooperate outwardly with all your heart. When we walk with God in this way, He will work in you to will and to do of His good pleasure [see Philippians 2:13]. You can change successfully in this way."

And so we continued to make headway in understanding.

Later that day Matthew was responding angrily towards Andrew, his brother.

"Matthew!" I responded, lovingly, entreating him with just a look.

Ashamed, he turned his head away. We don't always need to instruct, reprove, or correct our children verbally. He knew his own spirit.

Very soon Matthew responded to God asking, "What am I suppose to do?"

God spoke clearly to his heart, *"Put off your anger. Put on the new man [Colossians 3:8-10]. Pity your brother instead of demeaning him with angry retorts. Entreat him with velvet on your steel. How would you like to be treated if this were you?"*

Instead of turning away from these God-led thoughts or ignoring them as he typically had done before, Matthew chose to listen. Then he chose to cooperate with God instead of his fleshly thoughts and responses. The outcome was lovely. Everyone was pleased, but especially the holy angels that were there working with all our hearts.

As I reflected on this, I was delighted to see that I, too, had chosen to heed God's entreaty to my heart by not responding in belittling anger or pitiless hail to Matthew. I just called for his heart by speaking his name to interrupt the old pattern. Heeding the voice of God was the reason for this success. God performed His mighty work

to will and to do His good pleasure, as we cooperated to a good end. I was God's little mouthpiece to gain Matthew's attention and to arrest the course he was taking. But it was God that performed the miracle to change his thoughts, and feelings inside—and Matthew's response corresponded to the inward change.

Building character is interrupting the old fleshly ways so that there is an opportunity for our children to hear God and to choose to cooperate with His ways instead. But they don't always listen, do they? So building character can also be instructing them practically in what are good and evil thoughts, feelings and how they should respond. It's teaching them the basics. But even knowing what is right isn't always sufficient to bring about change. So real growth in character building means going all the way to a deeper training of the will, that is, to see to it, with God directing your steps, that your child does what he knows is right. At times, consequences and motivations will need to be part of the program of learning. Keeping in touch with what your child is thinking, feeling, and why he responds the way he does is a work that takes much effort and prayer, day in and day out, year after year.

My boys' ages eight and ten had made friends of many of the deer that frequented our yard. They named their deer "Big Nose", "Friendly", "Baby Saved", "Loco", "Dainty Toes" and others, according to their outstanding trait. The boys would spend a fair amount of time morning and evening with these deer gaining their trust, getting closer and closer to each of these animals which was very rewarding.

They fed these deer with cracked corn this morning and came inside for family worship. It was late fall and hunting season had been in progress for a few weeks. The boys earnestly

prayed for protections of their many deer friends every morning and evening. We were in the middle of worship when we heard two loud shotgun shots!!

My stomach wrenched at the sound as had Jim's and the boy's.

Matthew said, "That was one of our deer friends I'm sure. That was so close! Father we need to go and see!" Fear and apprehension were obvious.

Jim and the boys went down our back hill to the road below to investigate. I stayed back. Soon they returned. All three of them returned crying.

"It was 'Big Nose' mother. They shot her! We saw her struggling to breath—she is suffering awful. Father said we couldn't stay there to watch. Hunters are awful men!! They shoot innocent animals. The deer don't stand a chance. These road hunters are illegal. They shined a light in her eyes to blind her and shoot her." And Matthew went on.

Andrew voiced his heartache as well with vehemence. "I hate hunters. They kill our pet deer. I'll never talk with another hunter ever again. They are all bad! They killed 'Big Nose' my favorite deer. She ate out of my bowl for the first time this morning." And tears flowed profusely.

We all cried, hugged and prayed to God to soothe and comfort our sorrows and to let "Big Nose" die without suffering long. The reality of imagining her suffering was too much for all of us.

"Let's sit down for worship." Father said, "We need to talk about this further. God doesn't want us to hate the hunters but to forgive them. Let's consider what Jesus would do were He in our situation."

"I don't know if I want to talk about forgiveness. This hurts too much. It isn't fair! I think

Jesus would hate hunters too." Matthew voiced with pain. And Andrew voiced agreement.

The countenances of both boys showed painful, emotional hurt with the loss of their "Big Nose". My heart pained that they had to experience this. We talked about forgiveness. We talked about not all hunters hunt this illegal, cruel way. Not all hunters are bad.

"We hurt over this but we can't hate. Jesus looks upon hate as murder. So we must yield up our hate to God and take His forgiveness in its place or we are no better than the hunters as you see them. We must realize that some hunters hunt fairly. Not all are poachers and shine deer. Some hunt for eating better meat in deer. We can't fault all hunters for what these men did here today. Your father hunted deer before the Lord asked him to quit—he wasn't bad. We need to give our hurt to God and let God bring justice to the bad hunters." I added.

"I will never like hunters ever again. They killed my 'Big Nose'." Andrew voiced.

Through the day I prayed for the boys in their struggles that God could reach their hearts to comfort their sorrows and bring reason back to the throne of their hearts. I saw them struggle periodically and would pray or talk as needed.

During the day I had to be firm when one son voiced hate vehemently towards the hunters. His feelings were ruling and hurting him terribly and my son was cooperating.

"Lord what shall I do?"

"This is harmful to Matthew. He needs to yield up these ill feelings to Me to subdue for him. If he doesn't they will continue to wound and hurt him and all around him even further. Hateful thoughts hurt the hater. Restrain this expression now."

"Okay Lord. Be with my words, gain his heart and offer him freedom."

Reasoning didn't work this time so I had to send him on a grizzly run, gave him time with God, then we talked and he was subdued considerably by yielding up his wrong thoughts to God.

Andrew's response now doubted God. "We asked God to protect our deer why didn't He? We have prayed every day!"

"God's ways are best we must trust God even when we do not understand. God lets evil run its course so we can abhor sin and see it for what it truly is. Sin and selfishness hurts everyone. This can help you choose to follow God more closely or you will do hurtful things to others if you don't let God have all of you."

This reasoning worked a heart change in Andrew and he stopped thinking doubting thoughts about God.

That evening during family worship we talked over some Bible texts that could bring a nice balance to the boys. Little by little their hate subsided and forgiveness took its place by our loving persistency to win their hearts and bring them in touch with God day-by-day and moment-by-moment.

Two weeks after this instance a real estate client came by to talk with Jim about some property. Lonesome our wild pet bear came for a visit while this hunter and his wife were there. I offered the husband to feed our pet bear and he declined but his wife fed Lonesome. The boys entered into conversation with the husband in his camouflage clothing. A friendship began—he was such a nice fellow—an honest, and a fair hunter. This man became a good friend of my boys and was the final step for our boys to fully forgive the illegal hunters that shot their pet deer "Big Nose."

God had a plan to give opportunity for the boys to see that not all hunters are alike. Some

poor people hunt wild game to feed their families and do it fairly. God can provide for some in this way. The boy's attitude was strongly influenced in a Christ-like direction.

This is character development. Taking wrong thoughts and feelings bringing them to Christ and cooperating to think new thoughts being willing to change. It's in Christ's power that this is possible for us and our children to forgive.

Do you listen to your child with a listening ear and heart? Do you know what he is thinking or struggling with? Are you willing to put forth the effort necessary to learn and do this? It is so very important. This work of studying your child's disposition and directing his steps to God to be changed can *never* be laid aside without undoing the work you have begun. Consistency is essential! Developing character must become our life's priority.

Power for Living

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