

## **Strengthening Training – Building Good Character**

Journal: One thing I would like to change about my character is.... (share at tables)

Let me tell you a story....I had my nephews over for the day a few weeks ago. So I decided we should all do play doh because that's fun right?! So we dump out all the play doh toys and I get them each their own lump of play doh and I am feeling pretty good about myself as a mom and auntie because this is FUN stuff.

And then it begins...they start to mix the play doh colors, they begin to argue over the toys, the play doh starts to fall off the table and stick to my feet and the chairs and their clothes. Slowly I go from easy breezy fun mom to tense, agitated, annoyed mom. I can feel my shoulders tense and my words are getting shorter and less friendly.

I started to clean up around them and under them and behind them and complain about the mess. How I wished I would have reacted was to just not care about mixing colors because really, who cares. And I wished I had just left the mess until the end and sat at the table and made some stuff with them instead of Martha-ing all over them and cleaning up around them.

Isn't that maddening? You can tell someone how you would like to act, but in the moment, you don't do it. It takes training. We need to build good character. Character is basically the sum total of our actions and reactions. If most of the time we act poorly, or have bad reactions – it reflects bad character. And we want to control our actions and reactions because it helps us parent better and it also teaches our kids the right way to act. But being able to control **our bad reactions is hard to do. It's not just a matter of willing ourselves to act better because then we would already be acting better. It's** also not just about praying that we would act better because then for sure I would be acting better and many of you too.

We should pray and ask God to help us be great moms, but we also have to do our part, which is to learn and practice a new way of living. So growing our character as moms (learning not to yell, to be gentle and kind, to listen with compassion, to discipline consistently, to have integrity with our kids when we say we will do something we follow through) means learning how to act and react differently in the areas where our actions/reactions are bad.

### **A. Character is trained through constant practice.** (Hebrews 5:11-14)

Just like our muscles grow stronger through training. Maybe some of you love the whole strength training thing, doing a certain number of reps and sets to build your biceps and then triceps and upping the amount of reps and the weight you use. **That's not my favorite. But the whole strength training** idea is good

because it is how we grow character. By practicing, over and over again to react **in the right way, it helps us do the right thing at the right time. I'm going to show** you how to do that in just a few minutes using stories. Stories are a way to reflect on our good or bad behaviour and then share how we did it right or failed to do it right but would like to do it the next time. They train our brain. And by being intentional in how we share our stories we learn how to do it the right way. Oh, we can all tell stories about how we got it wrong and instead vent and gossip. **But that's not what we want to do. That would be like strength training** with really bad form and here you think you are doing all this great work for your muscles but actually you are injuring yourself because your technique is off. We **don't want that.**

So a key part to building good character is not just asking God to help us overcome and stop acting badly, but we should also ask Him to show us **HOW TO ACT IN THE RIGHT WAY** when we are in situations when we usually fall. There are three main **reasons we keep falling into bad actions and reactions:**

1. **Unresolved hurts** – **we have experiences and memories that we haven't taken** the time or effort to deal with that keep affecting us. I think back to junior high where you get teased for everything, your clothes, hair, wrong answers in class. You just want to be liked and having that insecurity continued to shape me and **now as I parent I see it bleeding onto my boys. The minute another child didn't** like something one of my boys did I was on them to make it right because I **wanted them to be liked, even if it wasn't a big deal or it was the other kids' issue.** I was parenting out of that unresolved hurt and the answer to that is inner healing.

2. Another reason we have bad reactions is **emotional overwhelm.** When you think about it, pretty much all of our bad character comes from times when we are overwhelmed and parenting is crazy overwhelming! When we have enough **sleep, peace and quiet, it's easy to do the right thing. Not so much when you are** tired, emotionally drained or fired up and your kids are just so selfish and inconsiderate!

3. The last reason we have bad reactions is it's **what we've been taught.** It's the effect of our upbringing. What was modeled for us is how we act. Which is why, we want to learn this and do better if what we knew growing is up is not how we want to act now.

## **B. How to change and grow good character**

So there are **two key ways we can change and grow good character.**

1. **Modeling.** Finding those that are where you want to be in your life and faith and imitating them. This is why we have the live it weeks here at Selah too. So we can help each other, model for each other, learn from each other.

2. **Stories.** Everyone loves a good story. You see this across cultures. You see this in the movie industry, books, sitting around a campfire with friends, telling ghost stories in the tent. **Stories move us, inspire us, evoke emotion in us and have the power to change the way we respond in various situations.** Stories are in fact the primary means by which people have passed down their histories, their traditions, their beliefs and how it is like them to act for thousands of years. They call this – Oral Tradition. Other than western countries, where literacy has taken over, oral tradition is still the primary means by which people raise up and pass things on from generation to generation. It was the primary means by which the Scriptures were passed on for the first 2000 years of our existence.

These **stories teach us:**

- a. **What God is like.**
- b. **History.** How did we come to be?
- c. **Encouragement.** Stories that encourage us to take steps of faith, even in the midst of impossible circumstances. Like the story of David facing the giant Goliath.
- d. **Focus and Attention.** The stories would teach people where their focus in life should be. All through the OT when the Israelites would put their focus on God, He would deliver them, when they would drift away and rebel they would be back in bondage. God was teaching them to keep their eyes on Him.
- e. **Warnings and Correction.** These stories showed why it was so important to **follow God's law. We saw what happened when people disobeyed God's words.** David has an affair and then has the husband killed. Look how God confronts him:

**2 Samuel 12:1-7a, 13 (ESV)**

And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, **“There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.”** Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, **“As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”** Nathan said to David, **“You are the man! ...David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”** And Nathan said to David, **“The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die.**

God used a story to grab David's heart.

f. **Modeling and Example** – Stories teach us what type of life we should be living and how to act. Jesus said the most important thing to do was to love God and to love people. When someone challenged him on how to do that, He told a story...it's found in Luke 10:25-37. It's the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus told that story to engage their hearts as a way to teach them what it meant to love. Jesus used stories all the time!

**Mark 4:34a says "In fact, in his public ministry, he never taught without using parables."** He used stories ALL THE TIME. And we are told in the Bible to model ourselves after Jesus, so then we need to become storytellers as well. **What is a parable? It's a story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson.** Another way we see stories used in Scripture is through testimonies. Testimonies are just personal stories of things we have experienced. And stories still teach us these things today. **People haven't changed, we still love a great story. Unfortunately most of the great storytellers these days are teaching values and lessons that don't focus on what it means to follow Jesus. Hollywood has lots of great storytellers!**

- a. Paul Zak, a professor at Claremont College and author of a number of books on brain science, trust, stories and oxytocin writes in Psychology today...

*Everyone likes stories. We like to listen to stories, read stories, watch stories (movies, TV, theatre) and tell stories. In fact, stories are our normal mode of information processing. Stories are so normal to us that we don't even stop to think about why that is.*

*Let's say you are listening to me give a presentation on the global economy. I'm NOT telling a story, but giving you facts and figures. If we had you hooked up to an MRI machine we would see that your auditory cortex is active, as you're listening, as well as Wernicke's area of the brain where words are processed. If you were reading a newspaper article on the same topic then we would see, again Wernicke's area as well as your visual cortex as you are reading.*

*But what if I started telling you a story about a family in South America that is being affected by changes in the global economy – a story about the father going to work in a foreign country to earn enough for the family, and the mother having to drive 100 km for health care... what's going on in your brain now? the Wernicke's area would be active again, as well as the same auditory or visual cortices, BUT now there's more activity. We would see many other parts of your brain light up. If, in my story, I described the sharp smell of the pine forest high in the Andes where this family lives, olfactory sensory areas of the brain would be active as though you were smelling the forest. If I described the mother driving over rutted muddy roads, with the vehicle careening from side to side, your motor cortex would be lighting up as though you were driving on a bumpy road. And if I started talking about the devastation the family felt when their young son died before he could get medical treatment, then the empathy areas of the brain would be active.*

*Which means that you are literally using more of your brain when you are listening to a story. And because you are having a richer brain event, you enjoy the experience more, you understand the information more deeply, and retain it longer.*

*Paul Zak, a professor at Claremont College and author of The Moral Molecule: How Trust Works, researches the role of oxytocin. Oxytocin is a neurochemical in the brain that Zak says gives the "it's safe to approach others" signal in the brain. In his research he has discovered that:*

- I. If you develop tension in the story you will sustain attention.*
- II. If you sustain attention, then it is more likely that the people hearing the story will start to share the emotions of the main characters in the story.*
- III. If people share the emotions of the main characters, then they are likely to mimic the feelings and behaviors of the characters when the story is over.*

*Listening to a character story like this can cause oxytocin to be released. And if oxytocin is released then it is more likely that people will trust the situation and the storyteller and more likely that they will take whatever action the storyteller asks them to take.*

Think about what this means for our kids! Kids love to hear stories. The same stories over and over and over again! Have you ever been lying in bed with your kids and made up a story using their name in it? One where they are the hero? Or you tell a story about a naughty boy using a different name but telling exactly the same thing your child did so they hear it from a different perspective? Jesus is brilliant! He engaged adults' hearts and connected with their empathy and compassion and conscience. We can do the same. And we can learn in the same way by telling stories to each other. When we hear a story of something someone else did in their anger, and how they handled it better, it gives our brain another option to try in the moment. And when we feel along with the story it opens the doorway for us to try a different action and reaction too! What an amazing brain we have and what a cool and very fun way to learn to change.

So we want to learn to tell stories that will inspire us and help us to change. Character Stories. Stories that teach us how to act better when we are dealing with overwhelming emotions like fear, anger, sadness, hopeless despair, shame and disgust. We are going to use stories to demonstrate how we acted in good or bad ways. And we are going to use stories to show how we could act differently in the future. What do we mean exactly by acting differently? This is important. Do we mean speaking quietly from now on when talking to our kids, do we mean no snide comments, do we mean stop the silent treatment? What is the goal?

In John 13:34-35 Jesus says "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By

this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Jesus says the number one character trait of a Christian is their love. **So our goal as Christian mom’s is to respond in love in every circumstance.** Do your kids feel loved when they are around you? We went through using S.T.A.R. a few weeks ago on the blog post about disciplining other people's kids, where the R was about responding in love. This is what we will be doing with our character stories in the coming weeks.

**When telling a good story there are two main things you need:**

1. **Attention** – a good story captures the attention of the listeners. It has to have enough details to keep us engaged, but not so many details that we get lost in the information.
2. **Emotions** – once we have their attention, we want to engage them in the emotions of what we felt as we were going through the experience we are **describing in the story. Isn't it great that we have already been practicing some of this with all the appreciation exercises? You already know to write down how it made you feel. Now we are just going to add one more thing...how you responded and then we're going to share that story with someone, which we already have been doing at our tables.**

**So how to share your story:**

1. Use your feeling words for your emotions
2. Use feelings words for your bodies
3. Use eye contact
4. Use tone and speed of voice.
5. Use facial expressions and body language
6. Keep your story short (3-4 minutes)
7. Stand and face the person or sit on the edge of your seat so you can use your hands and body to speak.

**Communication is 7-11% the words you say and 90% body language and tone of voice!**

-in your workbook are key points for writing and sharing character stories  
-take them through quieting and then into reflection (stories) have them share in 3's

### **Take Home:**

1. What kind of stories am I **filling my mind with and my kids' minds with?** (Videos, movies, books, video games) What kind of stories am I sharing – gossiping, venting, harping stories that only leave me and others with bad action and reaction options? Do I need to change anything or confess anything?
2. Write down a time when your husband built joy with you. Use the worksheet to help you know what to write down. Then share that story with your husband.