THE PREVENTIVE POWER OF CHARACTER

INTRODUCTION

Welcome, folks, to this special season of prayer. There are many, many good reasons to engage in a time like this, not only for individuals, but also for a whole body of people. And this particular focus—this call to *Character and Christlikeness*— is among the most important reasons to do it.

As we begin, I want to take the first three days to show you why character development in the pursuit of Christlikeness is so critical. Then during 12 sessions after that I will lead you through a series of meditations on twelve character traits that will hopefully increase your hunger and clarify your vision for what it means to live, love and serve like Jesus.

So are you ready? As the title of today's focus forecasts, let's think about the "preventive power of character."

COMMENTARY: THE PREVENTIVE POWER OF CHARACTER

Perhaps nothing has been more destructive to the Christian witness in our society today than the combination of perennial moral failures and pervasive media. Never before have there been so many ways for bad news of Christian failures to come to light through social media outlets. On the one hand this is a necessary thing, because nothing hidden can be faced and dealt with. But on the other hand, the compounding effect of so many viral stories creates the impression that these problems are pandemic, leaving far too many people concluding, "All Christians are hypocrites. All churches are not to be trusted. Christianity is a poor religion."

The world around us hears and sees reports of sexual sin, extramarital affairs, drug or alcohol abuse, and too often stories of lying and coverups to protect the image of a church or pastor. Too many churches wind up dealing with problems of abusive leadership, internal conflict, financial mismanagement, and even crimes.

These are what we might call explosive problems. And even though many of them ultimately spring from sin, many of those sinful behaviors could have been prevented if those involved had been people of better character.

For example, take the problem of sexual immorality and marital affairs. Even when a person is tempted in their heart with a strong desire to sin, stronger character traits, such as the trait of honesty, could have prevented that person from giving in and being overtaken by the desire. Someone who has been shaped into a person with a strong passion for honesty simply cannot tolerate living in the kind of deception that an affair requires. That trait of honesty has a *preventive power.*

Interestingly, the Lord made this principle very clear in the earliest stage of human history. Remember the story of Cain and Abel? When Cain became angry over his brother Abel's offering being favored by God, the Lord warned Cain with this perspective on sin. He said:

> **"Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."**
> **Genesis 4:7**

Sin is portrayed as "crouching" at the door wanting to get inside, potentially taking over Cain's heart so to speak. But according to what God said, Cain could have kept that from happening. God is clearly telling Cain that he has some control over whether he lets sin in or not. "Sin is crouching at the door."

That is often the case with sin. Temptation can be warded off. Many times sin can be avoided by human effort…by good strong character. Not always, perhaps, but often. Much more often than we are prepared to admit.

Many traits other than honesty have this preventive power. Integrity. Diligence. Gratitude. Respect.. and more. That's what we will be working at over the next many days. We'll be briefly examining 12 traits and then reflecting on each one in relation to our lives and praying a specially crafted prayer for each day. Are you ready? Let's reflect on the preventive power of character in your daily life.

REFLECTION:

Please take some time right now to think about some ways you might be tempted to do something wrong: speak out in anger, hide the truth, gossip, cheat, hold a grudge, look at something immoral, backbite, disrespect someone, violate your own conscience, and the list goes on…

- If you have succumbed to temptation in any of those areas recently, highlight them in your mind right now.
- Apologize to the Lord.
- Thinking of each one of these sins as still crouching at your door, what character trait might help you resist that temptation and behavior? *Example: speaking out in anger.* During this season of prayer we will eventually focus on the character trait of generosity. We'll learn that generosity is "gladly giving what others do not earn, deserve, expect or require." The greatest expression of generosity is not the generosity of money, but the generosity of spirit. Giving others the benefit of doubt: that they did not intend to offend you, or even if they did, that they were actually frustrated about something else and maybe would wish they had treated you better if they knew how it hurt you. That's generosity of spirit—trying to think the best of another person even if they've done nothing to deserve it. That trait can often prevent the sin of anger, because you don't let your feelings of hurt build up to the boiling point.
- But keep in mind, our overall goal is not just sin-prevention; it's Christlikeness. Like Jesus. While being crucified, experiencing excruciating pain, still somehow He looked down from the cross and with the most incredible spirit of generosity said, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." That's where we are headed. But for now, it's about prevention. The *preventive power* of character.
- Meditate on these two scripture passages:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:23-24

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

1 Corinthians 10:13

PRAYER:

Dear Father, Your Word promises that You will always provide a "way out" of temptation and sin. I am beginning to see that stronger character is a significant way you have provided. During these coming days of prayer I'm asking You to shine a spotlight on any area of temptation and sin where I can take responsibility to redouble my efforts to resist. Would you reveal over the course of these days of prayer what character traits I can begin to focus on to deal with some struggles I have in overcoming certain kinds of sin? I pray this is the name of Jesus and for His sake. Amen.