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HUMAN NATURE AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

“Whoever wishes to understand fully the words of Christ must try to pattern his whole life on that of Christ.” These words from *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a’ Kempis, a fourteenth-century monk, echo an approach to Christianity that seems to have fallen out of favor in recent times. By contrast, contemporary Christianity places its primary emphasis on salvation by faith in Jesus, rather than by doing the hard work of transforming one’s character. In Timothy Keller’s recent *New York Times* bestseller, *The Reason for God*, the author flatly states that it’s a mistake to view the Christian faith as “a form of moral improvement.”

Some people say you can’t change human nature, or at least only in a marginal sense. It’s not hard to compile evidence in support of this argument. On the other hand, many of us have witnessed friends or family members who have made great strides in character, often as a result of struggling valiantly with some personal problem or challenge that they were forced to face. Speaking as a Theosophist, the belief that you can’t change human nature strikes me as nothing more than a convenient excuse to avoid doing the hard work required for living a life reflective of the teachings found in, say, the Sermon on the Mount or the guidelines found in *The Golden Stairs* of H. P. Blavatsky.

What is the best way to go about changing ourselves? Aristotle once noted that “excellence of character results from habit,” meaning that there must be a consistency of effort put forth over a period of time. In this regard Benjamin Franklin devised a practical approach of working on only one virtue for each month of the year. The trials and tribulations of daily life provide the battleground where our good resolve is tested. Good character cannot be wished into existence; it takes a sustained effort and must be developed in the hustle and bustle of daily existence. As the German poet Goethe observed: “Talent develops in quiet places, character in the full current of human life.”

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