

Ideal Character: Faith, Hope and Love

SYNOPSIS: We could list 100's of essential character qualities necessary for a flourishing, Christlike life...and I would be thoroughly overwhelmed!

Paul knows the human capacity well and simplifies.

Like the three primary colors an artist blends together into all the shaded colors in the rainbow, Paul focuses on *faith, hope and love* as His shorthand description for spiritual maturity. It's the dynamic interplay of all three primary colors that bring out the depth and breadth of the picture in the artist's imagination. These describe what it means for God's children to be like Jesus Christ. This is not an either/or quiz but rather a *Both/And/And* Reality.

Faith looks back on the certainty of who God is and what He has promised in order to draw resources for life. *Faith* expresses itself in our daily lives through *love* as *hope* provides an eager expectation to persevere.

Hope is future-oriented, focusing on the certain and joyful anticipation of some future good. Therefore, we persevere with self-control to actively live out our *faith* and build character as we now serve others through the outpoured *love* of God within.

Love is the tender, strong outpouring in our everyday lives of our spiritual being towards the welfare of others. *Love* seeks the best for others as it flows from a sincere *faith* and springs from *hope*.

Eternal life in Christ Jesus is *received by faith, results in love and rests in hope*.

A Summary of Verses for Faith, Hope and Love

A rich variety of verses tie this triad of *faith, hope and love* and tightly together. It seems that Paul views this triad as a shorthand description of what a mature, Christlike life looks like. The NT joins these three (*faith, hope, love*) together in a seamless unity. I have been around Christians who focus on one and that diminishes the others. At times, I've done that myself! The very moment we separate *faith, hope and love*, though, we end up with a spiritual corpse. Study these for yourself to develop a lens to view our lives through accurately and to develop an inner resiliency.

Verses referring to all three.

1. "By *faith* we eagerly wait for the righteousness for which we *hope*. [The] only thing that counts is *faith* expressing itself through *love*" (Galatians 5:5-6).
2. "[We] have heard of your *faith* in Christ Jesus and of the *love* you have for all God's people—the *faith* and *love* that spring from the *hope* stored up for you in heaven" (Colossians 1:4-5).
3. "Now *faith, hope and love* remain, but the greatest is *love*" (1 Corinthians 13:13).
4. "We remember before our God and Father your work produced by *faith*, your labor prompted by *love*, and your endurance inspired by *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:3).
5. 1 Thessalonians 1:9b-10 also describe this triad. They turned from idol worshipping to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (that's *faith*), to serve God who is both living and true (*love*), and to wait for His Son, Jesus, who will return in power for His people (*hope*). Jesus, you have no rival, no equal!

6. Paul again prays these three virtues of **faith**, **hope** and **love** into these young lives in 1 Thessalonians 3:10-13. Paul prays for what is “*lacking in your faith*” (3:10) and that “*your love [might] increase and overflow for each other*” (3:12) as they focus on their living **hope** (3:13, “*blameless and holy...when our Lord Jesus comes*”).
7. “But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on **faith** and **love** as a breastplate, and the **hope** of salvation as a helmet” (1 Thessalonians 5:8).
8. The first three chapters in 1 Thessalonians describe **faith**, **hope** and **love**. 1:1-10 brings to light essentials of our **faith** for healthy disciples. 2:1-13 sketches out our Family ministry, raising disciples based on **love**. 2:14-3:13 describes the resources and the life-releasing benefits of tough trials, **hope**. *Faith! Love! Hope!*

Verses referring to two of the three.

1. John designed the entire book of 1 John around **love** and **faith** and **obedience**. We continue in **obedience** because of perseverance that comes from **hope**, so they are closely aligned.
2. “The goal is **love** flowing from a sincere **faith**, which produces a good conscience, which leads to a pure heart” (1 Timothy 1:5). “...That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our **hope** in the living God” (1 Timothy 4:10a).
3. “For this very reason, make every effort to add to your **faith** goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to **self-control**, **perseverance** [both results of a living **hope**]; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, **love**” (2 Peter 1:5-7).
4. Now **faith** is confidence in what we **hope** for and assurance about what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1).
5. [Not only have we “been justified by **faith**” (Romans 5:1)],” but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, **hope**. And **hope** does not put us to shame, because God’s **love** has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us (Romans 5:3-5).
6. “**Faith** without its outworking is dead, and the outworking of **faith** [that is, **love**] completes it” (James 2:18-22).

A Deeper Dive

Faith looks back on the certainty of who God is and what He has promised to draw resources from our connected life with God. This fuels our abundant life of love today and provides sustaining hope for tomorrow. Faith is based on the unswerving conviction that God’s unseen presence is here and that His promises will be fulfilled (Hebrews 11:1-3+6).

Many of us have been scripted by the opinions and perceptions of others, more than by the truth of who God is and of how God sees us. So, we need **faith** to renew our minds to shift to our object of faith, God Himself. *From our limited perspective, faith is spelled “R-I-S-K.”* Key words like purity, integrity, courage, confidence, decisiveness, active, laying it all on the line, risk-taking, faithful, forthright, and hardworking flow out of scriptural faith.

Hope provides a certain, joyful anticipation of some future good. It’s difficult to find NT passages on trials without joy in the context. **Hope** releases joy when there is no visible basis for joy. **Hope** involves patience and tenacity as we expectantly look forward to experiencing God’s abundant provision in this life, and ultimately the sure return of Jesus Christ. **Hope** is just as

certain in God's heart as **faith**, only it's oriented toward the yet unseen future. *Hope* trains us as eternal beings to choose God's promised, long-term benefits instead of short-term gratification, like toddlers will. Therefore, we willingly persevere through resistance and pain, criticism and misunderstanding, attack and abandonment, to fulfill God's will.

Our motivation for heroic endurance comes through **hope**. We won't quit because hope provides the "*Rocky Principle*." In the Rocky films, Rocky gets up off the canvas every time he is knocked down. This vision of *hope* expands our lives, releasing tenacity, which then supplies a framework for internalizing perseverance and self-discipline. Such a living *hope* was a primary focus of the 1st century saints. Key character traits associated with hope are: staying power, tenacity, joy, endurance, perseverance, resiliency, doggedness, deferred gratification, peace, patience, discipline, self-control.

Love is the tender, strong outpouring of our whole spiritual being toward another. Love wills the other's good, authentically ascribing worth to them. Seeing others as image-bearers is the basis for evangelism in the world and disciple-making in community. **Love** is the bursting forth of **faith** through the curtain of time into the practical Realities of life today as we rest in **hope**. Some love responses are: grateful, caring, cooperative, supportive, kind, good, gentle, serving, compassionate, empathic, understanding, merciful, connecting, and communicating.

"As an adopted child of God you have become to me like Jesus, my elder brother. As I look at you, I cannot but see you held by him in his love....I cannot think of anyone without seeing them within the circle of the Trinity."ⁱⁱ

How would our lives look if we consistently walked in this triad of virtues?

Could we possibly see a portion of our life story painted below?

If so, we then know God's next project to partner together with us on. Ask the Spirit for discernment to be aware.

- **Faith** and **love** without **hope** = We tend to start fast but lack staying power. We easily shift to fear or discouragement and don't finish well. The eager expectation of God breaking in is missing to develop self-control and perseverance.
- **Faith** and **hope** without **love** = We may be able to eloquently explain controversial theology or possess great theology of the past (Old Testament, *faith*) and the future (end times, *hope*). Even with this solid knowledge of **faith** and **hope**, we do this without **love** and with a harsh, attacking edge with little present expression of sensitivity, care and kindness. Both **faith** and **hope** must be activated through **love**. We become bloated, religious eggheads like the Pharisees. In his Epistle, James calls this a dead faith if truncated from the expression of works of love.
- **Love** and **hope** without **faith** = We chase after the newest fads, rushing from one spiritual outbreak to another or from conference to conference looking for the next "*new thing*." We have little basis for discernment without a strong, robust faith-based on God's Love-Letter. We often chase after emotional hype and call it "spirituality" settling for what is emotionally satisfying.

Faith, **hope** and **love** are centered on an entire abandonment to God that confesses that He is our all in all. We recognize our limitations but are not fixated on them. Be honest about where we are on our journey. But don't let our limitations stop us. Our strength is in the Lord. His power is certainly made perfect in our weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Yes, such a life is powerful, otherworldly, impacting, because it's Christ-like.

- **Faith** pushes out regret, guilt and shame.
- **Love** pushes out apathy and self-referenced living.
- **Hope** pushes out fear, anger, idleness and settling for less.

“If I have a high view of humanity, and a lens which sees people as a necessary part of my existence and experience of the divine, it will change the way I do relationship, I treat others, and the way I use my resources and time.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Humility Re-couples Truth to Life

Unfortunately, somewhere these truths have too often been uncoupled from life.

We collapse this triad into one or two, as if it’s a multiple-choice quiz. We distort the message: “*It’s all about love.*” Instead, embrace full-orbed life, the intersection of all three. We are called into an active life of *love* in this moment, one that draws from *faith* and is sustained by *hope* (see Galatians 5:5-6). The catalytic intersection of this triad of synergistic responses, empowered by the Spirit of God, transforms us from center to circumference.

Yes, such a life is powerful, otherworldly, impacting, because it’s Christ-like. Jesus characterized His heart as *gentle* and **humble** (Matthew 11:29).

Faith, hope and **love** flowing out of humility describe healthy, Christ-like character. Our early church fathers called *humility* the “*Queen of all virtues*” because it perfects all other responses. I like the definition of humility as “*seeing ourselves accurately.*” It’s not that we are **nothing**. It’s just that our Family-of-Three and serving others are far and away the **largest** part of the equation. We now see ourselves as God sees us, in light of who He is. Therefore, we stop our unhealthy preoccupation with ourselves. Without Jesus we can do nothing, but with Jesus we can do everything that He has called us to.^{iv}

But what if one of the three is missing or out of harmony?

- **Faith** without *humility* degenerates into a fleshly, harsh aggressiveness.
- **Love** without *humility* degenerates into a weak, counterfeit do-gooder.
- **Hope** without *humility* degenerates into a crippling passivity.

What holds me back from experiencing and expressing **faith, hope** and **love** like this? No one and nothing can prevent me from experiencing **faith, hope** and **love**, if I make a choice to work hard to partner with the Trinity. **Faith, hope** and **love** are an indivisible cluster, as integrally related as the three primary colors. All three are essential to the multi-colored diversity of life.



No matter how gnarly it may get here in “*this evil age,*” the living *hope* of Jesus’ return in majesty and power has always supplied Jesus-people with “staying power.” Live in **hope** coupled with **faith** and **love**. The moment we lose our expectant confidence in the future, we are doomed to being dominated by trials, attacked by anxiety and/or overwhelmed by hopelessness, fear and lies like: “*I don’t measure up.*” “*I’m not enough.*” “*I’m just broken.*” “*God doesn’t care.*” “*God is disappointed in me.*”

Let’s glance back at 1 Thessalonians 1:3 again, Paul’s prayer.

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by **faith**, your labor prompted by **love**, and your endurance inspired by **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

The first column of the diagram below reflects God’s creation design as servant-first influencers. We find satisfaction in intense effort to serve because serving is its own reward. The relational Trinity is generous Self-Givers (“For God so loved the world that He gave...” in John 3:16, for instance). They fashioned us in this same image of generosity. And we serve others *from* acceptance, not *for* acceptance.

Intense Serving	Immediate Source	Ultimate Source
"your work"	"FAITH produces"	"before our God and Father...in our Lord Jesus Christ"
"your labor"	"LOVE prompts"	
"our indurance"	"HOPE inspires"	

The second column underscores our immediate source for such effort. Effort in the Christian life is produced, prompted and inspired by *faith, hope* and *love* as the inner, sustaining motivation. God created us as physical beings. Therefore, we lead with our body in this life of faith. God has designed us to put forth intense effort and passion in our action-learning. We express this through the physical actions of our bodies. Our Three Partners are not opposed to effort but attempting to earn. I call these Spirit-drawn responses “*transforming responses*.”

Finally, the only ultimate Source for godly character is the Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit. By now it has become self-evident that we cannot generate godly character in our own effort. The Three-in-One God partners with us in and through our personal choices. Maintain the creative tension of the paradox of *Both/And/And* in order to learn to *bounce well* on our spiritual journey and to develop spiritual *resilience* and *buoyancy*.

ⁱ From our perspective faith is often *risk*. From the perspective of Reality, the **only risk** is whether we heard correctly. If God is calling, that “risky” response is the most sane, sober and safe response in the universe!

ⁱⁱ Darrell W. Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity*, (Vancouver: British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2002), p. 67. Johnson’s book is a spectacularly excellent book on the Trinity.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mike Safford, published booklet, *The Necessity of Community*, p. 46.

^{iv} Just so I’m not misunderstood, I’m not downplaying the need for self-awareness, to honestly access our strengths and weaknesses, our limitations and possibilities. I’m writing to increase *awareness*. This for me is a crucial part of maturing well, this inner transparency.

What I’m saying is that the largest part of the equation by far is God, not us. He continues to stretch me beyond my present grasp of myself, breaking through limitations and weaknesses and showing that His strength is perfected in the midst of my weaknesses. So, *humility* tags into self-awareness, honesty in what we can and cannot do well at this time. It also soars beyond that because the largest part is an unlimited God, who has chosen to partner with me, and does not seem to concerned with my weaknesses.