

Episode 45: Commitment, Character, & Change

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[00:02:48]

Good morning and welcome to ConneXions Classroom Podcast. It is the first Saturday of 2015 and I thought it would be appropriate to do this podcast about the power of commitment since it's the New Year and we're all making resolutions that hopefully we want to keep this year, and how honoring commitment will also build character, or the lack of honoring commitment doesn't build character, and how following through with commitments and forging character requires the ability to change—the humility to change.

Let's start with the word commitment. What does the word *commitment* mean? It means to do, to pledge, to covenant, to promise, and to contract with yourself and at times with another person. Approximately 40, 50 years ago, we were in a different world and a different time and when you gave your commitment to someone, it was your bond. Your word was your bond. That was usually the way that we made contracts with each other, is that we would give our word. There was very little need for paperwork or signatures, only your commitment or word was given.

When you said that you'd do something, the value of someone's commitment was unbreakable and not even death could compensate the bond or pledge that two people made with each other because their family members would honor it even though they were passed on.

Commitment has incredible meaning in connection, and most people were loyal to its meaning. Unfortunately, and sadly today, the word commitment and meaning of commitment has changed. Our world has lost touch with the true meaning of commitment. We commit ourselves to friends, to institutions, relatives, relationships, spouses, partners, children. And many of us, most of the time, don't even think twice about the meaning of commitment and what it truly means to commit to another person.

When life, or relationships, or jobs, or marriages, or anything else becomes uncomfortable, we oftentimes have no problem foreclosing on our relationships, on our homes, on our spouses, on our children, our work, our environments, we file for bankruptcy, etc. And oftentimes we give very little recognition to the emotional connection that we have to the commitments we've made. We think, *everyone else is doing it so why not me?* And this attitude is often what allows us to justify ourselves in breaking the commitments that we've made.

I'm actually sitting in an airport as I'm recording this podcast and so the person that was talking in the background was over the intercom system. I was thinking today as I was riding on a bus that there were signs on the bus saying if someone who needs assistance such as a pregnant woman or an elderly person, please be understanding and gracious and give them your seat. It made me think of this podcast that I was going to record. Give them your seat because you have a commitment that you've made to honor people who are in need.

We learn to rationalize our behaviors when it comes to breaking our commitments. We blame others for our lack of commitment and it's commonly the fault—according to us—of someone else for our lack of personal follow-through with the commitments we have personally made to ourselves, to God, or to another person. We live in a fast-paced world and we have been given permission from many people in many areas in our lives to expect instant gratification and instant comfort. We've learned and we've been reinforced that if we don't have something we want, we can manipulate the scenes in order to get what we want—even if it means selling out on our commitments.

It makes me think of my grandfather who I did not know. I met him a couple of times when I was a little girl, but my mother tells stories about my grandfather and says that he was a man of his word. He was born in the late 19th century and was very honorable as a man. He owned a grocery store. He was very respected in his community. He lived in a small town and he honored his commitments. People who knew him loved him and always knew that they could trust him.

A couple of years ago I went back to the town where he lived and my mother was raised. I was in a museum—it's just a small, small town, like doesn't even have a stop light small. I went into this museum and this man that I met, his grandfather knew my grandfather and when I told him my name, he said, "Oh my goodness, I have heard stories about your grandfather and the level of commitment, and respect, and how honest, and honorable he was." That really was impressive to me because what it did is it told me that our honesty and our willingness to honor spans death, it

spans time. And here was this person that was two generations removed from my grandfather and his grandfather, who knew of the stories of honor and commitment.

What is it that precludes us from wanting to follow through with commitment? Oftentimes, we don't want to be uncomfortable, so we need to make a commitment but we don't want to be uncomfortable physically, socially, financially, sexually, emotionally, spiritually, etc. Or we don't want to be stretched physically, emotionally, or in any other way. Or we don't want to feel accountable to preserve or complete our commitments. We must learn to commission ourselves and stand erect and immovable when life becomes uncomfortable, uneasy, difficult, unpleasant, disturbing, distressing, or fearful. When we are willing to be uncomfortable, and distressed, and stretched, these kinds of experiences stretch us and they build character, they build emotional, physical, and spiritual stamina. These are the experiences where the stretching happens and the emotional and spiritual maturation takes place.

[00:10:15] Commitment & Shame

We've talked a little bit about what commitment is. Let's bring in this concept of shame. Those of who you are not aware of shame, I encourage you to listen to the podcasts on shame and also on faulty core beliefs. It will help you better understand what that means.

Let's go back and think about why is it so difficult to keep a commitment in our day? What makes that difficult for people? Commitment takes consistency and a willingness to follow through. When we make commitments, we may not see the difficulties that lie ahead and so we're committing to persevere no matter how difficult it becomes. If we have been enabled in our life, we oftentimes will fold because the task becomes too uncomfortable, too distressing, and because we've not done things that are difficult, we can always opt out to quit. We can say and believe that we can't do it, and thus we begin to believe that we can't. And then, shame will come in—shame, that great lie that tells us all that we can't and that we don't have to follow through.

Shame tells us things like it's too hard, it's impossible, I didn't sign up for this, I'm not strong enough, I didn't agree, I'm better than this, this is not fair, I didn't know it'd be like this. Shame says that if your commitments become too hard and too uncomfortable, then you have a trap door you can slip through and you can get out. When I'm in shame, I'm typically in some kind of a relationship or several relationships that reinforce or enable me to break my commitments as well. This particular dynamic of not following through with my commitments and being enabled to do so are the fruits of the demise of character.

What I mean by that is that when I am allowed either by myself through denial, through rationalizing, or through somebody else giving me permission to check out of my commitments, it has a propensity to destroy character.

Now, let me say right here that there are some commitments that we make in life that need to be broken and I understand that. And so, I'm not talking about keeping a commitment that would create danger, or abuse, or someone would be harmed in the process of holding those commitments. Those kinds of commitments do need to be broken. I'm talking about all the different commitments that we don't keep just because it's difficult, like I don't want to wake up

in the morning and do my exercise program because I'm tired. Or I've now changed my mind on my diet because I'm at this particular restaurant and the food is right in front of me and I want to partake of it. Or I commit to be in a marital relationship and things aren't happening the way that I expect that they should and so I decide this is too uncomfortable and so I want out.

Being able to stand firm and stand steady in this position of holding onto your commitments and following through with them will create and will forge character.

Character—what is it? Character distinguishes us and gives us morals, values, and ethics by what we've been engaged in. So, whatever kind of commitments I've been engaged in, it will create character. The way we form character is that we connect with experiencing challenging, difficult experiences, or labor that's challenging, or any kind of hard work, experiences of humility, or acts of service, consequences of choices, responsibility that is backbreaking figuratively and sometimes literally, feelings of discomfort. These are all experiences that are difficult and those kinds of difficult experiences are the gems in life that construct, erect, fashion, produce, and form our character. There is no other way to gain it. You have to engage in demanding things and persevere through them in Truth with strength, with personal responsibility, and integrity.

And if you will choose to behave in those ways, you will forge this beautiful characteristic called character—character of spirit, character of emotion, character of being.

Character is the ability to live a life where the choices you choose reflect impeccable honesty, personal responsibility, and humility. Your life is a tapestry of experiences where the power of personal choice or free agency is required to move through the experiences presented to you. When someone is full of character, their life is reflective of their personal integrity and uprightness towards the principles of Truth, morality, honesty, responsibility, and a willingness to be humble in all things.

Charactered living requires a willingness on the part of the individual to make active choices with the willingness to be responsible, not only for their part or your part, and accepting the outcomes those choices produce. What that means is that when I choose, I'm willing to be responsible for whatever outcomes or consequences that get created because of these choices. Forging character is a conscious process whereby the individual is constantly focusing on their own thoughts, perceptions, feelings, behaviors, and adjusting and critiquing themselves to be consistent with their personal honesty and responsibility.

What that means is that I'm always looking at myself and I'm focusing on my own thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and I'm adjusting them to make sure that they're consistent with my integrity. So, a charactered person does not react to another person's behavior or situation. What they will do, is they will respond to the stimulus presented and consciously run it through their lens of perception. This will produce a response that is congruent with who they choose to be and how they choose to share themselves with the world.

The choices that they will make and how they present themselves do not ever involve force or fear towards another person, or deception of any kind—no manipulation. This person who is full of character is fully aware that their thoughts and behaviors may not be appreciated or may be

seen as threatening towards others. However, they're not imposing their own thoughts and perceptions onto the other person, only sharing what their angle is. The outcome of this rigorous lifestyle of integrity is a person who is full of wisdom, patience, unconditional love, personal sacrifice, integrity, charity, compassion, empathy, and emotional and spiritual strength and stamina. This type of person is full of character.

I want you to think about yourself and see if you live those kinds of characteristics. Characteristics of integrity, and compassion, and empathy, if you feel like you're a wise person, do you respond instead of react? Do you have patience? Are you responsible? As you live those kinds of characteristics, you will forge a characterized lifestyle.

Character-building is an essential part of any person's ability to heal oneself and become an emotionally honest person. Forging character is a skill and is not given to a person merely because they deserve it or because they desire it. Rather, character is developed by practice and intense effort on the part of the individual.

Character building is not a destination one arrives at. Rather, it is like learning to play the piano. The ability to play the piano beautifully is the outcome of years and years of practice and countless hours of honing that particular skill. It is wonderful to behold their fingers move across the piano in an effortless motion and produce the most magnificent and pleasing sounds as they share with others their command of their instrument. Enjoying a relationship with a characterized individual is similar in that you reap the pleasures and benefits of the years of practice and work they have previously done. They're able to be so connecting, so open, so honest, so responsible. It's so easy to relate with them. It's very similar to meeting a musician and enjoying their music.

I want to talk about the power of change and the power of choice. If you are struggling with being a characterized individual, you get to use your free agency and start changing the way that you show up in the world. The power of choice is the greatest gift we have been given. We are free to choose no matter what the circumstances or situations we find ourselves in. No one can make us think or feel in any particular direction.

A note here. I'm very aware that we are influenced for sure by people, experiences, events, and tragedies, and those types of experiences and effects can be and are devastating to the human spirit. Yet we are always free to choose how we're going to perceive and hold these experiences and situations. Think of the famous author Viktor Frankl. He was a holocaust survivor. He endured horrific and unimaginable experiences of physical, emotional, and spiritual torture and death. And yet, because of the power of choice and how he chose to use choice, he did not give the Nazis his spirit. He was physically and emotionally assaulted yet he chose not to hate, not to fear, or allow his abusers to control his thoughts and feelings. This is a magnificent example of the power of choice and how we can be free from fear and control if we learn how to manage it.

Choosing to change involves humbling oneself and choosing to learn from our own experiences or vicariously through another person's experiences. We are willing to be taught either by example of someone else or by having an experience that produces uncomfortable outcomes and consequences. Choosing to change without being compelled is a very mature and humble choice to make because it involves acknowledging to self and sometimes to others that you're not

correct in your perceptions of things, and therefore change is needed in order to be congruent within yourself and with your moral constitution.

Or, you can be compelled to change. However, that is very a painful and disheartening process for the person involved and for those who love and care for that person. Oftentimes, the compulsion to change is preceded by great consequences and heartache, both physical, emotional, marital, financial, social, etc. And those consequences are being presented to create a change. Being compelled to change is oftentimes not a pleasant experience for anyone involved in the process.

The person can either humble oneself or they can go into a defensive posture when the compelling process is present. Unfortunately, the person must still choose to change by choosing to become humble. If the person is not humble, they will not learn through this experience of being compelled and unfortunately this compulsion of circumstance was not significant or sufficient enough to motivate them into real and lasting change. A change of heart is needed, and that requires a humble heart and a contrite spirit.

Regardless of whether I choose voluntarily or whether I'm compelled to change, both directions lead to the need to humble oneself. When I humble myself, and I'm teachable, I can mature and develop wisdom where it previously was absent. Being willing to change allows me to deepen relationships with people I love and those who love me by being open with them and available to hear, and validate, and show empathy for them. When I'm compelled to change, it is also an opportunity to learn from the discomfort of my situation and change in a direction of connection with self and others.

[00:24:25] A Continuum of Willingness To Change

There is a process of change—a continuum. On one end of the continuum is an *unwillingness*, and if you go to the other side of the continuum, it is *changing my lifestyle*. On the far-left end of the continuum we think things are fine—this is the unwillingness part—we don't see any problem. So, that person is in heavy denial, they're numb, and they're uninterested. And then, up on the continuum to the right, moving towards change is *they're going to think about it* and here's how it gets described: we receive feedback and think of changing. We're slightly less defended and we have some humility and interest in what other people are saying to us. And then, moving further to the right is *planning and preparing*. We receive more feedback, see the problem, and feel the Reality. We're less numb, and we see benefits of change, and we start making the plan to change. We haven't changed it, we're just thinking about it. And then, to the far right, the end of the spectrum is *changing* which means I will do anything to change. I activate a plan and I'm proactive to myself and others around that plan. I educate myself, and I keep my commitments, and I find a support system. I change my attitudes, and my perceptions, and motives, I learn to love myself, I practice empathy and love for others and myself, and I help others make lifestyle changes, along with myself. I'm looking to make a change in my lifestyle, not just a mental change.

[00:26:17] Humility & Ego

All of this process of change involves a willingness, or a level of humility. Part of the reason

why we struggle with being humble is that we all have ego. The evidence of being human is having an ego. Our ego supports us to be self-centered and greedy, sometimes to be angry and to blame others, or to not take responsibility for ourselves, to be unaware, and to live in denial, and to not humble ourselves. Our egos can encourage us to make choices to only think of ourselves and do what we want.

When we make these kinds of ego-centric choices we need to humble ourselves and change. The change requires willingness on our part, yet if we're unconscious of what we're doing and how we're affecting others, we're less likely to choose to change.

The hope is that we're willing to listen to other people around us that we trust, and that they're willing to give us feedback and help us see where we need to humble ourselves.

Here's some examples of a process of willingness. Jack's favorite food is cheese pizza. In fact, since he's moving out of his parent's house, he has eaten little of anything else. He's young and relatively healthy and he's living the college life, so he figures it's not a big deal, it's what everybody does. However, he's experiencing difficulty focusing at school, increased fatigue, weight gain, and a digestive problem. Jack's process of change might look like this.

1. He doesn't see any problems with eating cheese pizza for every meal. His roommates joking about his stack of pizza boxes in the fridge irritate him. He thinks *why do they have to tease me? I don't bother them about their food. Why won't they just leave me alone?* The health warnings from his roommates and their feedback about his weight gain also feel persecutory and mean to him. He feels like they're teasing and poking fun at him simply because he's different from them.
2. After a couple of months of consistent comments about his increased weight, which is now too pronounced to ignore, and after attempting weeks of exercise that have not reduced his weight gain, Jack thinks that his diet could be affecting him in ways he doesn't fully recognize. He wants to ask his roommates to show him how to cook a couple of dishes but he doesn't do so because he's so frustrated with them for their abusive and abrasive comments. He thinks to himself, *I'd never live that down.*
3. As his physical symptoms deepen, Jack asks one of his roommates who is skilled in healthy eating whether his diet might be causing his fatigue and weight gain. They have a serious conversation about the ways his diet can and does affect his mental acuity, his weight, his motivation, and his long-term health. His roommate gives him some material to read about how to plan a healthy diet for the week. Jack reads it in earnest, however it looks like a lot of effort and Jack isn't sure he wants to maintain that level of work every day. He writes down an outline of what he will eat the next week, but by the next day he's put all of that on the shelf. Just talking to his roommate made him feel better about himself. He thinks *maybe if I just add a bit of fruit to my diet every day then that will make me feel better. I can ease myself into this, no reason to do it all at once. Besides, it's not worth it to spend every extra moment shopping and cooking when I'm barely getting all my homework done. Pizza has always worked for me in the past and it's so tasty and so easy, after all.* Jack does purchase some apples and he orders pineapple on his pizza more often.

You can see his level of denial and then he got a little bit interested but it got too hard and so he just decided not to follow through with it.

4. After a couple more months, Jack feels out of control and is afraid. His weight and lack of energy are making everything more difficult. He becomes very self-conscious and avoids social interactions with anyone he does not know well. He is sleeping behind in his long-term goals regarding grades, graduation, and career building. He feels sick most of the time and rather demotivated. He sees very clearly that something has to change. The path he is on clearly is something that has to change, and this path will destroy his career, his health, and his family goals. He is very afraid and no longer cares about doing things the easy way. He pulls out the papers his roommate gave him months ago and begins to plan and budget his time and money the best he knows how. He then goes to his roommate and expresses his fears, explains his plan and asks for consistent help. He reports to his roommate on his daily food intake and his roommate helps him make a weekly menu and shopping list. He pays for and attends a cooking class at school. He spends his car savings on a physical trainer and gets up early to go workout every day before he goes to class. He no longer avoids working out because of fear of looking silly. The consequences of not working out might include an early death. He develops a consistent daily regiment and gathers a circle of close friends of whom he reports to and who validate him and hold him accountable to his commitments, and expect change from him. He learns to care for himself and to honor his commitments to himself regardless of how he feels, instead of using food and laziness as emotional outs.

That is a great example of going through that process of unwilling to the far-left hand side of the continuum, all the way to the far right, which is *I will change*. That example gave us some clarity around being unwilling, and then thinking about it, and then planning and preparing, and then changing.

Those are the four steps. Unwilling is one. Number two is thinking about it. Number three is planning and preparing. And number four is changing, which means I will do anything.

Let's hit a pause button. I'd like to share some more information about commitment, character, and change in another podcast for the following week. My hope is that the noise in the background wasn't too distracting. I know it was distracting for me. And more importantly, my hope is that you'll look at your life, look at your lifestyle, and decide, especially as the New Year is upon us, whether you're going to follow through with the commitments that you have made for this year to yourself, to your loved ones, to your employment, to a spiritual practice, to maybe your animals that you take care of, to anything and anyone, follow those commitments and don't allow yourself, even though things are uncomfortable or cause dis-ease, to allow you to feel your free agency to opt out of following through with those commitments. If you will do so, the outcomes will create a strong character and you will enact a process of mighty change in all ways.

Take care of yourself. Stay connected, have a great 2015 and we will be talking to each other in a week. Bye bye.

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