

Chapter 3

Reputation

Truth #8: Today's choices set the stage for your reputation.

When you were born, your parents or guardians received the privilege of naming you.

Chances are, they spent the first few weeks of your life staring into your small eyes and repeating your name again and again to make it stick. They may have wondered, "Did I choose the right name? Does my baby look like a Margaret? Will her name match her personality as she grows up?"

With some time, your name kicked in. It started to roll off people's tongues with no hesitation. Today, you *own* your name. It is so intertwined with your identity that it's hard to imagine a time when anyone doubted the fit.

Whether you realize it or not, your name is important. As something you carry through life, it's worth taking seriously. Every choice you make affects how your name resonates in people's minds. Over time, your peers form a collective opinion about your name based on your choices. This gives birth to your *reputation*.

What do people automatically think when your name comes up? What pops in their head in the first five seconds? Is it "Oh, she's so sweet" or "Did you hear what she did under the bleachers at the football game last week?"

If it is the latter, you have a problem. Your reputation is only as good as your worst choice, and left unchecked, poor choices can create damage that's hard to recover from.

You and your name will be joined at the hip forever. By making a conscientious choice to protect it, you can honor your name and save yourself a lot of grief.

"A GOOD NAME IS MORE DESIRABLE THAN
GREAT RICHES; TO BE ESTEEMED IS BETTER
THAN SILVER OR GOLD."

(PROVERBS 22:1)



A GOOD REPUTATION = A SERIES OF GOOD CHOICES

If a girl makes an A on an English paper, does that make her a star student?

If a boy hits a home run, does that make him a stellar athlete?

Anybody can be successful every *once* in a while. But what people who achieve greatness have in common is consistency. A star student makes lots of As, not one. A stellar athlete makes multiple home runs, not one fluke hit.

The same is true for your reputation. It isn't enough to make one good choice and go back to following the wrong crowd. The choices you make reveal your character. They reflect the moral fiber—or lack of it—that exists inside you.

A great reputation is built through commitment and self-discipline. It emerges when you stay on track and choose well consistently. You know how a snowball starts small, but then gains size and momentum as it rolls down a hill? That is how your reputation works. Over time, your little choices accumulate. They keep growing and piling on top of each other until one day, you realize how *real* your reputation is.

Then the question becomes: Are you proud of your reputation—or ashamed to claim it?

What you should know is this: *Today's choices set the stage for your reputation. Nobody becomes a "bad girl" overnight. It all starts with the baby steps and choices you make now. So when you*

experiment with that first beer . . . that first cigarette . . . that first boy, you open a gate that's hard to close. You start down a one-way street with no easy U-turn in sight.

Experimentation can snowball over time and land you in the wrong crowd. This crowd may be ridiculously fun, but they aren't friends with your best interests in mind.

And while it's never too late to turn your life around, you can't make people forget your mistakes. Whatever choices you make, get ready to live with them. Sadly, one dumb decision can follow you the rest of your life.

Am I saying you have to be perfect? That after one slip, all hope is lost? No. Nobody makes good choices all the time. We're all human, and yes, we all make mistakes.

But when you stumble—or fall flat on your face—take your sin straight to God. Pray for help to do better, because only by God's grace can any of us stay on track (or get back on it). The evil forces in your life are led by Satan's attempt to separate you from God. Satan is powerful, but he is *no match* for God. Through Christ you can gain the strength to resist any temptation that seeks to interrupt God's plan for you (Philippians 4:13).

What if you already have a bad reputation? What if you've made so many poor choices in the past that your peers can't see you in a favorable light? If this is your story, keep the faith. Don't resign yourself to being a "bad girl" or assume there is no way out. Through God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26),

and by living your life aligned with Christ, you become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Will restoring your name be easy? No. Will it take time? Yes. Will some people hold past choices over your head even after you change? Probably. But that doesn't matter because ultimately, God's opinion of your reputation is the only one that counts.

So channel your efforts into pleasing Him. Let God redeem your mistakes and give you the peace that transcends all understanding (Philippians 4:7). God will bless you with friends who see your future, not your past, and in the process you'll gain a greater appreciation for God's mercy and unconditional love.

Whether your reputation is shiny and bright or dull and tarnished, you need God. It doesn't matter how faithful you've been in the past, because good people fall into corruption *all the time*. The moment you think you're safe against stumbles, completely immune to the risks everyone else faces, is the moment your risk increases.

"DO NOT BE DECEIVED: 'BAD COMPANY RUINS GOOD MORALS.'"

(1 CORINTHIANS 15:33 [SV])

Quick Quiz: Do You Notice Red Flags?

A guy you like has invited you to a concert. You want to go, but since the concert is out of town, you're scared your dad will say no.

He advises you to tell your dad you're spending the night at a friend's house because sometimes, it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. He also asks that you keep this date a secret because his ex-girlfriend thinks they're still exclusive. She'll go haywire if she finds out about you.

What are your thoughts of this guy?

- A. He is fun, cool, and adventurous. His spontaneity will keep things exciting.
- B. You can't believe he chose you over his gorgeous ex! You don't know what he sees in you, but it feels good.
- C. You don't trust him. Despite his winning smile, he isn't a nice guy.
- D. Forget this! Dump this creep already so you can hang out with your friends.

If you answered "C" or "D," your instincts are spot-on. A liar is a liar, and a guy who can't respect your dad enough to tell him the truth won't respect you either.

Asking you to keep the date a secret is another red flag. A healthy relationship stays in the light; there's no sneaking around or making up stories. Since you know that he lies, he's probably still dating his girlfriend and wants a fling with you. If that doesn't bother you, keep this in mind: if he'll do it for you, he'll do it to you.

Relationships with cheaters never go well. Cut your losses early by not getting involved.

THE TROUBLE WITH TROUBLE IS IT ALWAYS STARTS OFF FUN

You've probably been told to steer clear of bad influences.

But has anyone ever mentioned how charming and fun the bad influences can be?

In most cases, they are funny. Quick-witted. Physically attractive and socially adept. They have inside jokes and exciting lives. Being in their circle is like being in an exclusive club. Only the elite receive an invitation.

And here's a caveat: bad influences aren't entirely bad. They have good and redeeming qualities too—qualities that can help you justify your relationship with them even when you know it's not right.

When you spend time with a certain group, you gravitate to their way of thinking. You warm up to their ideas and grow desensitized to what may have shocked you initially. Once your sense of normal gets altered, the old values you once held true fly out the window. Your morals get compromised.

If you believe you can hang with a wilder crowd and not have their influence rub off, you're fooling yourself. The company you keep has a *huge* bearing on your choices. You won't lift the wild crowd up to higher standards; they'll drag you down to theirs.

As the saying in addiction recovery programs goes, "If you hang around the barbershop long enough, you're going to get a haircut."

For better or for worse, *your friends matter*. Besides your family, they're the biggest influence on your life. All it takes is one person, one seemingly harmless friend or boyfriend, to lead you astray.

The best time to get out of an unhealthy relationship is early, before you're deeply invested. *Pay attention to red flags like bad vibes and feelings of unease, because that's God speaking to you.* God will provide warning signs that a relationship isn't right, but He won't chase you down. It's your choice whether you tune into His clues or ignore them.

Does your peer group lead you off track? Consider these questions:

- Where do your happy moments come from? Are they rooted in good choices or bad choices? If you're happy because the coolest cheerleaders brag on you for getting wasted at last night's party, something is wrong. Straighten up your act and pick new friends.
- How do you feel *the morning after* a night when you made questionable choices, when you're alone in your bedroom? Do you feel good about what you did with your girlfriends or boyfriend, or do you feel guilty/ashamed/lonely? The truth that speaks the morning after, when your mind is still and quiet, is crucial to your Christian journey.
- Do your friends applaud you for doing what you know is wrong (i.e., stealing mascara from the drugstore or cheating on final exams)? Is their idea of right and wrong different from what your parents and church leaders say? Any "friend" who likes you best when you compromise your morals, act out, or rebel isn't a friend at all.
- Do your friends care about your hopes and dreams? Do they have hopes and dreams too? Friends who lack ambition make it hard for you to reach your goals. If you have to stay home to finish a project, do your friends understand, or do they get mad that you're bailing on them?
- Do you and your friends have deep conversations?

Do you connect on a spiritual level? Do your friends trigger feelings of peace and self-acceptance inside you, or are your relationships superficial? If you find yourself losing sight of God, downplaying your faith, or ignoring your faith altogether, you're with the wrong crowd.

- Are your friends obsessed with parties? Does life revolve around having a good time? Are you stuck in a cycle of doing the same thing every weekend, with no real growth? Good friends help you become a better person. They inspire you to aim higher and stretch yourself in a positive direction.

Let's be clear: your choices are your choices. And hanging around a bad influence is a choice. So while you're more likely to make poor decisions when you're in the wrong crowd, you can't blame them for your choices. *You* reserve the right to say no. *You're* the one responsible for protecting your name and reputation.

Your choices today affect your opportunities tomorrow. With every vice comes a trade-off, and as my friend's mother used to tell her, "A moment of pleasure, a lifetime of regret." Even a brief period of living on the edge can set up roadblocks for you later.

Consider this example: When I was in college, I knew a number of people who went crazy their first semester. They

played hard and were the life of every party. But come December, when grades came out, they paid the price. Their grade point average (GPA) was so low they spent the rest of their college years struggling to raise it to a C or B, because an A average was already out of the question.

That wild and crazy stage cost some people their dreams. One guy who wanted to go to medical school studied intensely from then on and never could pull up his GPA enough to qualify. Does that sound worth it to you, no medical school in exchange for one semester of parties and fun?

It's hard to think about these things when you're caught up in the moment, but you should. After college graduation, you'll face a highly competitive workplace. You'll be up against job candidates more qualified than you. To get a job that pays well, you need every advantage you can get. You can't afford to shoot yourself in the foot by creating predicaments you could have avoided.

Imagine where you'd like to be in five, ten, and fifteen years. Write down your aspirations on paper, and then work backward to ask yourself how today's choices may impact you getting there.

Do you hope to get into law school? Remember that when a friend encourages you to try drugs. The state-regulated boards that have to certify and accept you will ask you questions about drug and alcohol use and convictions, DUIs, and other offenses. Imagine trying to explain why you thought it was okay

to experiment with marijuana or drink and drive. Imagine having your future in the hands of a third party that decides you aren't trustworthy to help and protect others because of bad decisions you made earlier.

You'd be embarrassed and heartbroken, wouldn't you? You might wish someone had told you earlier how the past can haunt you.

Let's bring it closer to home now. Do you hope to get in a sorority? Remember that when boys push you to have sex. I've seen many beautiful, popular girls get dropped from every sorority because of their promiscuity and reputation. What happens behind closed doors does *not* remain secret. Sooner or later, the word gets out.

And then there are the more serious consequences of having sex, like getting pregnant or acquiring a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Even with your *first* sexual encounter, you run the risk of these events. Despite claims by our culture, premarital sex isn't cool and glamorous. It creates very real burdens like emotional pain and physical risks that can rob you of your dreams overnight.

All your choices matter, but the choices you make on Friday and Saturday night can make or break you. They follow you through junior high, high school, college, and beyond. Yes, God is merciful, but people aren't always as forgiving. They won't wipe your slate clean and forget it all.

Ask God to help you choose well, then pray for friends who do the same.

"FINALLY, BROTHERS AND SISTERS, WHATEVER IS TRUE, WHATEVER IS NOBLE, WHATEVER IS RIGHT, WHATEVER IS PURE, WHATEVER IS LOVELY, WHATEVER IS ADMIRABLE—IF ANY-THING IS EXCELLENT OR PRAISEWORTHY, THINK ABOUT SUCH THINGS."

(PHILIPPIANS 4:8)



MAKING A HABIT OF GOOD CHOICES

Do you dream of the day you'll have freedom? Are you eager for a life with no rules, no restrictions, and no nagging adults?

When you leave home, you'll get the freedom you crave. You'll enter a world where you can do what you want, when you want, with whomever you please. You can eat pizza for breakfast and cake for lunch. You can watch TV all day and skip class. You can take the money your parents deposited in your checking account for tuition and blow it on a new wardrobe.

There's only one catch: your choices will have consequences. Whatever you choose, you have to live with the outcome.

Eat poorly and your body pays the price. Skip class and your

grades suffer. Squander your parent's money and you lose trust, credibility, and spending privileges.

Making good choices is a habit. It requires self-control, discipline, and thinking twice. By practicing on small choices, you lay the groundwork for bigger choices to come. You also prove you're mature enough to take on more responsibility.

As Luke 16:10 says, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much."

You can't make negative choices and expect a positive life. You can't expect adults or peers to take you seriously if you're always impulsive or prone to taking the path of least resistance.

This is *your life*. Don't waste it by putting your future on the line for fleeting thrills. Don't let other persuade you against your will. *Your chief asset right now is your name*. You don't own a house. You don't have cars and worldly possessions. If you needed a job to earn money, your name is your selling point. So when people hear it, do they make positive or negative associations? Does your name add value to your life—or is it destroying your opportunities?

Clearly God can restore anything. No mistake is too big for Him to forgive and forget. But restoring your name among people is another story, especially those with set opinions that don't easily change. And while you can't dwell on their opinions or spend your life chasing their approval, you also can't ignore how the talk of your reputation may impede your life. Since it's

easier to keep a good name than it is to rebuild a bad one, think twice before doing anything that puts your name at risk.

God designed you to make positive choices. By making a habit of good choices now, you'll live better, sleep better, and be in a better position to continue choosing well when the stakes of your decisions are high.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What three words would your peers use to describe you?
2. Have you made choices that might contribute to a bad reputation? If so, how can you choose better next time?

3. Where do you see yourself in ten years? Do your current choices support your dreams, or could they hinder them?

4. On a scale of one to ten, where is your self-control? Will you be able to monitor yourself in college without an adult keeping tabs? How can you keep yourself accountable?

5. Is there a negative influence nudging (or pulling) you down the wrong path? If so, how can you resist that pressure? What positive influences in your life keep you grounded?