

You Must Start by Being Honest

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Sima Guang, who was the Prime Minister of the Northern Song Dynasty and a famous historian, lived in Sushui village, Xia County, Shanxi Province.

Sima Guang lived in Luoyang City while compiling a book entitled, *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* (1). One day Sima Guang told his old servant, Luzhi, to bring the old horse, which he had ridden for many years, to sell it at the market. Sima Guang exhorted Luzhi, "You have to tell the potential buyer that this horse has very attractive colored hair, is very tall, strong, has a mild temperament, and is physically very powerful. However, you must also tell the buyer that he had lung problems during the summer. Make sure that the buyer recognizes and pays attention to this point."

The old servant laughed and said, "Have you ever seen any melon seller promote the fact that his melons are bitter? Why do we have to tell the problems of the horse to potential buyers when they can't even see any problem.

Besides, his appearance is very good and nobody will be able to blame us when they find out about his illness.

Sima Guang kept shaking his head and said, "How much I make from selling the horse is a trivial matter; however, a damaged reputation is an important issue. The most important thing is to be a good person, by being honest and by keeping promises. Men's avarice for small advantages will easily damage the reputation of a man, which is the principle of being a man."

Sima Guang was always honest. He regarded benevolence and generosity as honorable conduct. He always referred to himself as "a humble old man." His virtue was mainly related to the character education he had received during his childhood from his father Sima Che. Sima Che had three sons of which Sima Guang was the youngest. He wasn't spoiled because he was the youngest. Instead he received a very strict education and learned the value of truthfulness, frugality and endurance.

For example, once when Sima Guang was five years old he decided he wanted to eat a walnut. His sister tried to help him; however she was also too young to be able to break the walnut shell. A maid came and soaked the walnut in boiling water for a while, and then it opened

easily. When his sister came back and asked him who had broken the walnut, Sima Guang told her that he had done it himself. His father heard the whole thing and thus strictly admonished him, "My son! How can you lie about this? Honesty is the fundamental behavior of being a real man. It is very important, so that others will be able to trust you." Hence, Sima Guang never lied again.

Sima Guang said, "In my entire life I have not done anything better than anyone else and there is nothing that I have done that I would be afraid of others knowing." This statement shows that Sima Guang was a just and upright person. When Liu Anshi requested advice from Sima Guang about how to establish oneself and how to manage in the world, he said, "You always have to start with being honest and always tell the truth under all circumstances."

Note:

(1) This is the title of a 294-volume chronicle, covering a period of 1,362 years down to the Epoch of the Five Dynasties.