

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg SC  
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**September 13, 2009**

**CHRISTIAN CHARACTER: “JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR”**

Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 6:30-44

This morning, we are beginning a new series of sermons that will take us through the Christmas season. We're going to be looking together at Christian character. At Christian character: at the different elements and concerns that make up and motivate the way that we live our lives *as men and as women and as boys and as girls who are followers of our Lord Jesus Christ*.

Between now and Christmas, for example, we're going to be thinking of such virtues as honesty and generosity, kindness and joy, patience and endurance, gratitude and peace, righteousness, faith, vision, love and hope – and, I suppose, I could have added a dozen or more other virtues on to that list, a list that comes to us from the pages of Scripture and comes to us, in particular, from the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This morning as we begin our series, however, I want to emphasize not so much these particular virtues, or virtues like them, but I want to emphasize *the foundation of all our Christian growth and character which is to be found in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ*. I want us to think of him, and I want to think of

- the power of his words, the words that he spoke
- and the power of the way that he lived his life
- and the power of the work that he accomplished on our behalf when he left his throne in heaven, descended to this earth as Paul describes it in Philippians 2, humbled himself to the point of death and rose again for you and for me.

I want us to think about the ongoing daily power of Jesus Christ at work within us *through his words, through his way and through his work*.

Let me say up front, that it is Christian character in particular, not just any character, that I want us to think about. But in emphasizing Christian character, that character that comes to us from Jesus Christ, I also need to say from the outset that this is no disparagement of those who are not Christians. There are many folks who are not Christian people who are good and kind and loving in their character. I know of some amazing people who never claim, nor want to claim that they are Christians. Some of them may come from other religions. They may be Muslims or Hindus. Some may be atheists or agnostic and you may have some of these folks as your friends. They are not Christians but they are wonderful people and I am grateful to God for such people as these. They make the world a richer, brighter and happier place and sometimes they put us who are Christians, who are followers of Jesus Christ, they put us to shame.

But my concern, first of all, and indeed throughout this series of sermons, is not with behavior and character in general. It is not with virtue in general. But it is, in particular with the *role of Jesus Christ and the character and virtue that he would form within our lives* – our lives, who call ourselves Christians. That is my concern: with the power of Jesus Christ, the power that he longs to give to us to transform our lives and to give to us a transforming life, a life that flows from him in every way, shape, and form, a life that flows from knowing him intimately and

being related to him so closely that we cannot get him out of our hearts and our minds. We cannot get his words out of our hearts and our minds. We cannot get his way of life out of our hearts and our minds. We cannot get his work of salvation on our behalf out of hearts or our minds. It is his impact on us in transforming power that I would like us in particular to think of throughout this series but especially today and next Sunday as we begin the series.

It's about sixty years ago now that Oxford professor C. S. Lewis spoke about the transforming power of Jesus Christ in a book called *Mere Christianity*. Most people today know of C. S. Lewis as the author of a children's series on the world of Narnia which in recent years has been turned into some movies. But about sixty years ago, he took some talks that he gave on BBC radio and turned them into a book called *Mere Christianity* which is still in print today. One of the questions he wrestles with in this book is the relationship between the behavior of Christians and non-Christians and he asks why Christians are not all obviously nicer than all non-Christians. Sad to say it's true! "Why are Christians not all obviously nicer (these are his words) than all non-Christians?" And what he says is this.

**Faith And Action.** First of all he says that it's really sad when Christian character and action do not match up to Christian faith. Think of our Call to Worship and the words from James and the importance that the letter that James places on the matching up of Christian character what we do and what we believe.

One: What good is it, brothers and sisters, if we say we have faith but we have no works?

**All: It is no good at all! If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and we say to them, "Go in peace;**

**keep warm and eat your fill," and yet we do not supply their bodily needs, our faith adds up to nothing!**

One: Do people have every right to say to us: "You have faith and I have works.

Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith?"

**All: Yes! For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.**

One: Let us seek, then, to fulfill the royal law, the law of liberty, the law of Christ:

**All: "We shall love our neighbors as ourselves!"**

One: Let us worship God in faith, word and deed!

James 3:8, 14-16, 18, 26

Lewis echoes these words by saying that, "When we Christians behave badly or failed to behave well, we sadly make Christianity unbelievable to the outside world." It's tragic but it's true. "When we Christians behave badly or failed to behave well, we sadly make Christianity unbelievable to the outside world."

**Complexity Of Judging Behavior: Where You Started, The Direction You Are Going.** And then he goes on to say this. He says that the issue of character and virtue and behavior is not simple, especially when it comes to comparing one person's character with another. Whether they are Christian or non-Christian, it is not a simple matter. He says, in Chapter 10, entitled "Nice People or New Men," that the issue is not just *where we are now* in our Christian character and life and virtue, how good or kind we have been in a recent action: the issue is not just about where we are now, but *how far we have come* from where we use to be, *and what direction we are going* in the future." How far we've come. What direction we're going in. Where we started. Where we are going to end. To Lewis, Christian virtue and character are not just about the immediate present, but about the journey and the direction of our lives. For example, he would say this,

- that there are some people whose moral life starts in the gutter. They have no advantages of birth or background. They start in the gutter, but they have climbed out of the gutter and they are now on the road, and they are traveling in a certain direction on the road and they have come a long way from where they began.
- And he would say that there are other people who were born to privilege, morally speaking. They were born in a palace but they are no longer in the palace. They have moved out of the palace and out of the garden, out of the yard and onto that same street as the person born in the gutter and they are ahead morally speaking, character speaking. This person may be ahead of that other person, but there is an enormous difference between them, morally speaking: one of them is moving in this direction toward Christ and the other is moving away from Christ. One person may look better on the outside but they are hollow on the inside, and their life is slipping away in the wrong direction.
- There are people he says “who are ceasing to be Christian but who still call themselves by that name.” Now there’s a scary thought! “There are people who are *ceasing to be Christian* but who still call themselves by that name.”
- And then, on the other hand, he says, “there are people who are slowly (in their character) *becoming Christian*”, who are so strongly attracted by Jesus Christ that their lives are changing and moving forward, but they just haven’t traveled far yet. Yet. They haven’t traveled far yet, but *their lives are being pulled and drawn by Jesus Christ, by the force of a relationship with Jesus Christ in a particular direction.*

And that’s my concern as we begin to think of Christian character: not character in general, not virtue in general, but Christian character in particular. Not first of all with the details (we’ll get into that in the weeks and the months that lie ahead), but my concern to begin with when we think about who we are and what we do, my concern to begin with, is with the impact of Jesus Christ on our lives, with the foundation of Christian character in our lives, with whether or not Jesus Christ is powerful to us, with whether or not he is a motivating force to us, a driving force, a magnetic force pulling us in his direction, transforming our lives so that we find increasingly day by day

- that we cannot get his words out of our minds or our hearts,
- we cannot get his ways, his way of life, out of our minds or our hearts;
- we cannot get his work, descending from heaven, humbling himself for us, out of our minds or our hearts.

**What is Christ’s impact in our lives?** Let me put it yet one more way this morning. I believe that God has designed us so that one of the most powerful forces impacting our behavior as human beings is the behavior, the thoughts and opinions of another human being, anyone who is significant to us, a truly significant other.

Think of it: the impact of another human being on our lives. Negatively speaking, we call this *peer pressure*, and we turn to our kids almost instinctively and we say to them, “Don’t get in with the wrong crowd. If you get in the wrong crowd, it’s going to change your behavior. You don’t want that and I as a parent don’t want that. They will drag you down.” And it’s true. We know it’s true. We know it’s deeply and profoundly true.

But this business of peer pressure can be generalized far beyond our concern for teens. It never goes away in life, though we tend to focus on our kids, our youth, our teens when we think of it that way. The power of other relationships over us is simply enormous and it impacts everyone at every age and stage of life.

- That's why magazines like *People* magazine and *Parade* and countless other magazines are so popular: because they are filled with stories about other people. We want to know what they're doing, what they're thinking, what they're saying. And while we may not buy into everything, bit by bit the lives we read about and admire, even from afar, become a large moral influence upon our lives and on our society.
- Or think of the television shows which are so popular. *Entertainment Tonight* or the talk shows, the reality shows – all focused on people and their lives.
- Or think of the powerful impact of sports figures and pop music figures. We call them stars or superstars.

Put all of this together and the evidence is overwhelming. Concrete evidence that as human beings we are wired to look at other people, and to make decisions about our behavior and our thinking on the basis of someone else's life. On the basis of someone else's life! It's powerful within our lives.

Let me put this positively and say this that the evidence is strong, indeed it is overwhelming, that the most repeated difference between the person who stays in the ghetto, in the gutter, and the person who makes it out (and many people ask why some make it out and why some never escape); the most repeated difference

is NOT the force not of a law: 'You ought to do this or that.'

NOT an ethical principle: 'It is better to live your life there rather than here.'

NOT money or fame or success or talent

but the evidence points clearly in the direction of the power of a single person impacting the life of another single person, magnetically either pushing them out of the ghetto or drawing them, pulling them, out of that life, to live another life. One life impacting another.

One of the most improbable scenarios I know of in this regard is seen in the life of a man named Ben Carson. I don't know if you've heard of Ben Carson or not. Dr Carson is the Director of Pediatric Neurosurgery and a Professor of Neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins University. He grew up in the ghetto of inner city Detroit. He's written a small but wonderful and very readable book called *Gifted Hands* (there's also a made-for-TV movie based on the book, also called *Gifted Hands*, starring Cuba Gooding, Jr.). The book begins with a powerful and memorable dedication. The dedication reads like this.

*"To my mother, Sonya Carson, who basically sacrificed her life to make certain my brother and I got a head start."*

To a mother, a single person who in this case was also a single parent, who "basically sacrificed her life to make certain my brother and I got a head start." She wouldn't let them go. She kept pushing them, shoving and cajoling and loving them until their lives were changed.

What an incredible impact, the impact of one solitary life sacrificed for somebody else, setting them free, transforming their lives, their thoughts, their words, their deeds in every possible way so that those lives would move on a different road and become transforming to hundreds and thousands of other lives along the way. This is what Sonya Carson did for her sons. She

remains their idol, their superstar.

And this is what Jesus Christ longs to do for you and me. This is the relationship for which we were created: so intimately related to him that we just cannot get his image (as Ben Carson cannot get the image of his mother) out of mind; we cannot get his image out of our mind – his words, his way of life and his work become more dominant than anything else in life, more powerful than anything else in life.

**Jesus' Words.** Think just very briefly of some of Jesus' words.

- “Love your neighbor as yourself and love your enemy as well.”
- “Judge not that you be not judged.”
- “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.”
- “Where your treasure is, where your money is, there you will find your heart also.”
- “Pray like this. Call God your father. Our Father who art in heaven.”
- “Forgive others their trespasses. If you do not,” says Jesus, “God will not forgive you yours.”

What amazing words. Powerful words. Challenging words. Transforming words.

**Or think of Jesus' Ways.** We read of Jesus feeding the crowd of five thousand. I don't know if you remember from our reading, but he was exhausted at the time. He just wanted peace and quiet and yet he relied on the power of God to keep on serving the needs of others by feeding the hungry, healing the sick, touching people who nobody else would touch, eating with others nobody else would eat with. I think of a high school dining room and I think of those who are eating alone who nobody else would sit beside. Jesus would go and sit with them. This is the way he lives speaking the truth even when it was dangerous to his life because he knew it was right. His words and his ways they are powerful and so are his actions in his work of salvation.

**So, think of Jesus' Work.** It's a remarkable passage, Philippians 2, that the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Philippi, challenging them to love one another with humility, just as Christ humbled himself, leaving his throne in heaven to come to earth, and for what? Well, to live and to die and to rise again for us, leaving his glory behind, not thinking about his own dignity but thinking of ours.

*“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ( He didn't just stop there but) he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on (an instrument of torture), a cross. Therefore, God has lifted him up, or highly exalted him.”*

He humbles himself. He trusts his dignity into the hands of God. What a remarkable work he did on our behalf. What a remarkable pattern he set for us.

And Paul says, as he looks to this work of Christ, “Let this mind also be in you:” *Jesus' words, his ways, his work.* Are they?

- Are these the things that fill our mind because Christ fills our heart and mind? If not or not yet, is this how we want it to be? And are we on that road, being pulled along the

road by Christ?

- Or do we look good on the outside but we're moving in the wrong direction and Christ has no personal impact on us at all? We're just living as we were taught to live as children but Christ is not the driving force within our lives.
- Is he our idol, our superstar or not?
- And does he shape the direction from now on of all that we think and say and do? Who is the driving force? Christ or just our feelings? Or the people who come into our lives today or tomorrow or the next day? We bend in whatever direction they want us to bend. Christ is to be our magnet, our superstar. Before we think of the details of character if he is at the center, all the rest will follow, not at once, but in due season, as we travel on that road following the one who is the way and the truth and the life.