

The Character of Christ

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

The sermon emphasizes the unique and transcendent character of Jesus Christ, highlighting His personality, sinlessness, and Incarnation.

Scripture: Isaiah 53:9, John 1:14, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Philippians 2:8, Hebrews 4:15, Hebrews 7:26, 1 Peter 1:19, 1 Peter 2:22, 1 John 3:5

Topics: "Christ's Character", "Sinlessness Of Christ"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the unparalleled personality of Jesus Christ, emphasizing the perfect blend of grace and truth that defined His character. His graciousness and truthfulness were evident in every aspect of His life, attracting people of all ages and genders. Jesus Christ's sinlessness sets Him apart from all other historical figures, with His foes, friends, and His own life testifying to His purity. The Christian Church's emphasis on Christ's sinlessness is crucial as it underpins the claim of Christianity to deliver from sin, making Him the unique Redeemer of mankind.

Transcript

Personality is the highest thing in life. It is also the most interesting, attractive, fascinating. The study of personality surpasses almost everything in practical value. If this is so general, it is essentially so with regard to the personality of Jesus Christ. We therefore commence by a consideration of the picture of Jesus Christ as He is brought before us in the Gospels. Taking the Gospels just as they are, as documents intended to be regarded as records of the appearance of Jesus Christ on earth, we will endeavor to discover the impression formed of Him by His earliest disciples.

What they thought of Christ may help us to right thoughts about Him. We will test Him just as we would any other human character. One of His closest disciples has summed up his own impression of Jesus Christ in the following words: "We beheld His glory ... full of grace and truth." These two words, "grace" and "truth," describe His personal character. By "grace" we are to understand His graciousness of soul, manner, attitude, speech and action. We can see this very plainly in His influence on the daily life of those disciples who were His constant companions.

It is writ large on every page of the Gospels that He was attractive to people generally, and not least to little children. It is a fine test of personal power to observe how little children regard a man, and Jesus Christ answers this test to perfection. Grace was manifest in everything that He was and did. There never was such a life of graciousness to those around. "Truth" is also another marked characteristic of the life of

Jesus Christ. Reality was stamped on everything about Him.

His life was holy, His word was true, His whole character was the embodiment of truth. There never has been a more real or genuine man than Jesus of Nazareth. It is not only the presence but the combination of these two elements of grace and truth in Jesus Christ that calls for attention. We cannot help noticing their perfect blend and their equally perfect proportion. Grace by itself might easily lead to weakness and mere sentimentality. Truth by itself might easily be expressed in rigour, sternness, severity.

But when grace is strengthened by truth, and truth is mellowed by grace, we have the perfect character and the true life of man. It is the union of these opposites in Jesus Christ in perfect balance and consistency that demands our attention. Other men are only fragmentary one-sided, biased. He is complete, balanced, perfect. Ordinary men often manifest unequally one or other of these two elements; Jesus Christ manifested them both in beautiful harmony and exquisite proportion.

He embraces all the good elements which mark other men, and it is not too much to say that there is no element missing which men think desirable in the human character. Not only so, He possesses all these elements in a higher degree than anyone else, and with perfect balance and proportion. There is no weakness, no exaggeration or strain, no strong and weak points, as is the case with the rest of mankind. Still more, there are certain elements and traits of character which are not found elsewhere, such as absolute humility, entire unselfishness, wholehearted willingness to forgive, and the most beautiful and perfect holiness.

Nor must we overlook the wonderful blending of contrasts which are to be seen in Jesus Christ; the combination of keenness and integrity, of caution and courage, of tenderness and severity, of sociability and aloofness. Or we may think of the elements of sorrow without moroseness, of joy without lightness, of spirituality without asceticism, of conscientiousness without morbidity, of freedom without license, of earnestness without fanaticism. [See Dudden, In Christ's Name, p. 9.]

Yet again, the prominence given to passive virtues side by side with the evident presence and power of manliness is quite unlike what we find elsewhere; the elements of meekness, tenderness, patience, and kindness have a place in His character and attracted women to Him as well as men. Have we ever thought of the peculiar position occupied by Jesus with the respect to the ideals of the sexes? No man has ever dared to call Jesus, in any opprobrious sense, sexless: yet in character He stands above, and, if one may use the term, midway between the sexes - His comprehensive humanity a veritable storehouse of the ideals we associate with both the sexes.

No woman has ever had any more difficulty than men have had in finding in Him the realized ideal. Whatever there is in men of strength, justice, and wisdom, whatever there is in woman of sensibility, purity, and insight, is in Christ without the conditions which hinder among us the development of contrasted virtues in one person. [Johnston Ross, The Universality of Jesus, p. 23.] In particular, one feature of the character of Christ as portrayed in the Gospels has often been pointed out - the picture of His perfect youth.

When this is contrasted with what is found in the Apocryphal Gospels the essential difference is at once seen. The beautiful sketch of Christ's boyhood and youth, with its perfect innocence, though without any weakness, is a fact to be pondered and explained. How, then, are we to account for this perfect blending and exquisite harmony? There is no doubt or question as to the environment of Jesus Christ; it was essentially and solely Jewish. His nation, place, home, work, were Jewish.

And yet the picture of Jesus Christ in the Gospels is not a Jewish picture. There is nothing in Judaism to explain it. The records of Jewish history, whether of Christ's own day or of earlier times, to say nothing of later centuries, will be searched in vain for any Jewish picture corresponding to that of Jesus of Nazareth. We can see something of typical Jewish character in our Lord's day from a study of John the Baptist and St. Paul. Although, therefore, Jesus Christ is historical and Jewish, it is abundantly evident that He transcends the limits of Judaism.

Nor is it a Gentile picture. There is nothing in Greece or Rome to account for it. The greatest and highest personages of these countries have never revealed anything approaching the grace and truth manifested in Jesus Christ. Nor can we account for this portrait by means of a blending of Jew and Gentile. There is nothing whatever in history to show that this would be the outcome of such a union of racial and personal characteristics. The typical blend of Jew and Gentile was seen in Alexandria in such a man as Philo.

We do not wonder, therefore, that the question asked by His contemporaries, "Whence hath this man this wisdom and these mighty works?" should be asked concerning His character by men of all ages, for there is nothing in history to account for Him. This, then, is the first point upon which attention should be concentrated, the personal character of Jesus Christ. If it be said that such a character is accounted for by evolution, we naturally ask to be shown the factors which could produce such a result.

Evolution necessarily presupposes a prior involution. You cannot evolve what is not there to evolve; and, bearing in mind that evolution, as generally understood, is the outcome of heredity and environment, we ask to be shown what there was in the heredity or in the environment of Jesus Christ to account for this "glory, full of grace and truth". His heredity and environment are known to mankind. Life in Palestine, together with the various racial and political influences that were at work, are all pretty familiar to those who have made themselves acquainted with the history of the time; and Christians can fairly demand the production of proof that Jesus Christ can be accounted for along the lines of natural evolution.

As a well-known scientific authority has rightly said - When evidence for a natural evolution of Christ, i.e. as He is portrayed to us in the Gospels, is looked for, none is forthcoming. [Henslow. Christ no Product of Evolution. p. 4.] Besides, if Jesus Christ was a product of evolution, how is it that no better man has since appeared, after nineteen centuries? Why should not evolution lead to a still higher type? Yet Jesus Christ continues to tower high above humanity. The acutest examination only confirms the truth of John Stuart Mill's well-known statement that Christ is "A unique Figure, not more unlike all His predecessors than all His followers."

This impression of the personal character of Jesus Christ is the first and earliest derived from a reading of the Gospels. But it is not the complete impression, and we must now take a further step. The perfect blending of grace and truth, although unique, is not absolutely conclusive proof of anything more than exceptional Manhood; but as we continue to read the story of Jesus Christ in the Gospels, we are soon brought face to face with a truly unique element. He is seen to be entirely without sin.

This, if true, means that there has been one Man in whom the entail of sin was broken, one Man utterly different in this respect from every other human being of whom we have any historical or actual knowledge. This is a gigantic fact if it be true, and it calls for the severest scrutiny. We have a threefold witness to the sinlessness of Jesus Christ. There is the witness of His foes. The Jews followed Him from place to place, watched Him with keen-eyed endeavor to entrap Him in word or deed.

Pilate and Herod, who were incarnations of cleverness and cruelty, could find no fault in Him, and He was only condemned at last by the production of false witnesses. He Himself challenged His opponents to convict Him of sin; "Which of you convinceth Me of sin?" a challenge which was never met, although He was surrounded by ruthless hostility almost all through the period of His earthly Manhood. Still more, there is the evidence of His friends. The cynical Frenchman said that "No man is a hero to his own valet," but this dictum is entirely set at naught by the story of Jesus Christ.

One after another of His disciples bears the same testimony to Him. One of His earliest followers said of Him that He "did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth." Another of them said, "We beheld His glory." They lived with Him intimately for nearly three years, occupying the same house, traveling at times in the same little boat, sharing common needs, enduring common ostracism, and yet not one of them could ever point to the faintest shadow upon His character. This testimony is all the more remarkable because of its indirectness.

It was only gradually that in looking back the disciples realized their Master was sinless, but they lay no stress on the fact. Perhaps this is because it seemed so perfectly in harmony with all they knew of Him. Above all, there is the testimony of Christ's own life. We have the record of His intimate communion with His heavenly Father, with prayers and some of His holiest and most intimate utterances. There is no trace of any defect ever being confessed by Him to God. He was ever preaching repentance to others, but never repented of sins of his own.

Not a trace of repentance is found in Him, though human piety always begins at this point. He was always denouncing sin, but never confessed to any sin in Himself. The best reason we have for believing in the sinlessness of Jesus is the fact that He allowed His dearest friends to think that He was. There is in all His talk no trace of regret or hint of compunction, or suggestion of sorrow for shortcoming, or slightest vestige of remorse. He taught other men to think of themselves as sinners, He asserted plainly that the human heart is evil, He told His disciples that every time they prayed they were to pray to be forgiven, but He never speaks or acts as though He Himself has the faintest consciousness of having ever done anything other than what was pleasing to God. [C.

E. Jefferson, *The Character of Jesus*, p. 225.] Still more, we have in Jesus Christ a fact that is unique in the history of human life and character - a perfectly holy Man declaring His own holiness. The universal history of the highest and noblest saints shows that the nearer they approached the infinite holiness of God the more conscious they became of their own lack of holiness, and yet in the case of Jesus Christ there is not only the absence of sin, but from time to time declarations of His own holiness and meekness.

There was not a trace of that self-depreciation which in others is always associated with the highest character. This is all the more remarkable if we observe the instances in the life of Jesus Christ when He expressed indignation against His own enemies. Yet there is nothing in His life for which He was sorry afterwards; no remembrance of evil ever impaired the consciousness of His fellowship with God. With every other man the expression of indignation tends to a subsequent feeling of compunction, or, at any rate, to a close examination whether there may not have been some elements of personal animosity or injustice in the expression of anger.

But with Jesus Christ there was nothing of the kind. Not for a single instant did the faintest shadow come between Him and His heavenly Father. He was without sin. [Forrest, *The Authority of Christ*, pp. 10-25.] And that which we find so evident in the record of the Gospels has been acknowledged on every hand

even by those who have not accepted Jesus Christ in the Christian sense of the term. David Strauss could say that Jesus Christ had "a conscience unclouded by the memory of any sins".

And John Stuart Mill wrote that "Religion cannot be said to have made a bad choice in pitching on this Man as the ideal representative and guide of humanity." If it be asked why the Christian Church has made so much of the sinlessness of Christ, the answer is, because of its close and essential relation to human sin. Christianity as a religion is unique in its claim to deliver from sin, and this claim is based on the sinlessness of Christ. If Christ's own life had not been sinless, it is obvious that He could not be the Redeemer of mankind from sin.

"Physician, heal thyself," would have a very definite personal application to Christ Himself. Now this unique element of sinlessness in Christ has to be accounted for. It is a moral miracle. Only one Man out of the millions of human beings is proved to have been without sin. Deny the sinlessness of Christ, and His inner life becomes an insoluble enigma, and His claim to be the Saviour utterly falls; accept it, and at once we are met with the simple fact that there is nothing like it in nature, and that it must be a moral miracle.

Now a moral miracle is just as real as a physical miracle, and it is for this reason that Christians call attention to the sinlessness of Jesus Christ. While sinlessness alone may not prove Deity, it assuredly argues for the credibility of the record and leads to the consideration of Christ's personal claims. This, then, is the first point to be considered in regard to Christ. His perfect life of grace and truth and His unique life of sinlessness call for attention and demand an adequate answer.

The alternatives are Incarnation and Evolution. Reject Incarnation, and then Evolution is utterly unable to account for Christ. If He was a man only, we ask in the name of that holiness which is the life of the intelligent universe, and in the name of God with whom the interests of holiness are paramount, how it has come to pass, that of all men He alone has risen to spiritual perfection? What God did for piety and virtue on the earth at one time and in one case, God certainly could have done at other times and in other cases.

If Jesus was man only, God could have raised up, in successive ages, many such living examples of sanctified humanity as He was, to correct, instruct, and quicken the world. But He did not; and the guilty of the moral condition of mankind is thus charged at once upon Him; and the real cause of the continuance of moral evil, and of the limited success of holiness and truth in the earth, is thus declared to be in God - that cause is the withholding of His merciful influences. [J. Young, *The Christ of History*, p. 243.] Are we not right in saying with Bushnell that "The character of Jesus Christ forbids His possible classification with men"?

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