

THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST

by William E. Channing

Channing's study of the moral and spiritual character of Jesus Christ, examining His virtues, teachings, and example as they reveal the perfections of the divine character and provide a model for human aspiration.

1 Chapters

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1. The Character of Christ

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The Character of Christ This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.—Matthew 17:5. The character of Christ may be studied for various purposes. It is singularly fitted to call forth the heart, to awaken love, admiration, and moral delight. As an example it has no rival. As an evidence of His religion perhaps it yields to no other proof; perhaps no other has so often conquered unbelief. It is chiefly to this last view of it that I now ask your attention. The character of Christ is a strong confirmation of the truth of His religion. As such I would now place it before you. I shall not, however, think only of confirming your faith; the very illustrations which I shall adduce for this purpose will show the claims of Jesus to our reverence, obedience, imitation, and fervent love. The more we contemplate Christ's character as exhibited in the gospel, the more we shall be impressed with its genuineness and reality. It was plainly drawn from the life. The narratives of the evangelists bear the marks of truth perhaps beyond all other histories. They set before us the most extraordinary being who ever appeared on earth, and yet they are as artless as the stories of childhood. The authors do not think of themselves. They have plainly but one aim, to show us their Master; and they manifest the deep veneration which He inspired by leaving Him to reveal Himself, by giving us His actions and sayings without comment, explanation, or eulogy.

You see in these narratives no varnishing, no high coloring, no attempts to make His actions striking or to bring out the beauties of His character. We are never pointed to any circumstance as illustrative of His greatness. The evangelists write with a calm trust in His character, with a feeling that it needed no aid from their hands, and with a deep veneration, as if comment or praise of their own were not worthy to mingle with the recital of such a life.

It is the effect of our familiarity with the history of Jesus that we are not struck by it as we ought to be. We read it before we are capable of understanding its excellence. His stupendous works become as familiar to us as the events of ordinary life, and His high offices seem as much matters of course as the common relations which men bear to each other. On this account it is fit for the ministers of religion to do what the evangelists did not attempt, to offer comments on Christ's character, to bring out its features, to point men to its higher beauties, to awaken their awe by unfolding its wonderful majesty. Indeed, one of our most important functions as teachers is to give freshness and vividness to truths which have become worn, I had almost said tarnished, by long and familiar handling. We have to fight with the power of habit. Through habit men look on this glorious creation with insensibility, and are less moved by the all-enlightening sun than by a show of fireworks. It is the duty of a moral and religious teacher almost to create a new sense in men, that they may learn in what a world of beauty and magnificence they live. And so in regard to Christ's character; men become used to it until they imagine that there is something more admirable in a great man of their own day, a statesman or a conqueror, than in Him the latchet of whose shoes statesmen and conquerors are not worthy to unloose. In this discourse I wish to show that the character of Christ, taken as a whole, is one which could not have entered the thoughts of man, could not have been imagined or feigned; that it bears every mark of genuineness and truth; that it ought therefore to be acknowledged as real and of divine origin.

It is all-important, my friends, if we would feel the force of this argument, to transport ourselves to the times when Jesus lived. We are very apt to think that He was moving about in such a city as this, or among a people agreeing with ourselves in modes of thinking and habits of life. But the truth is, he lived in a state of society singularly remote from our own. Of all the nations the Jewish was the most strongly marked. The Jew hardly felt himself to belong to the human family. He was accustomed to speak of himself as chosen by God, holy, clean; whilst the Gentiles were sinners, dogs, polluted, unclean. His common dress, the phylactery on his brow or arm, the hem of his garment, his food, the ordinary circumstances of his life, as well as his temple, his sacrifices, his ablutions, all held him up to himself as a peculiar favorite of God, and all separated him from the rest of the world. With other nations he could not eat or marry. They were unworthy of his communion. Still, with all these notions of superiority he saw himself conquered by those whom he despised. He was obliged to wear the shackles of Rome, to see Roman legions in his territory, a Roman guard near his temple, and a Roman tax-gatherer extorting, for the support of an idolatrous government and an idolatrous worship, what he regarded as due only to God. The hatred which burned in the breast of the Jew toward his foreign oppressor perhaps never glowed with equal intenseness in any other conquered state.

He had, however, his secret consolation. The time was near, the prophetic age was at hand, when Judea was to break her chains and rise from the dust. Her long-promised king and deliverer was near, and was coming to wear the crown of universal empire. From Jerusalem was to go forth His law, and all nations were to serve the chosen people of God. To this conqueror the Jews indeed ascribed the office of promoting religion; but the religion of Moses, corrupted into an outward service, was to them the perfection of human nature. They clung to its forms with the whole energy of their souls. To the Mosaic institution they ascribed their distinction from all other nations. It lay at the foundation of their hopes of dominion. I believe no strength of prejudice ever equalled the intense attachment of the Jew to his peculiar national religion. You may judge of its power by the fact of its having been transmitted through so many ages, amidst persecution and sufferings which would have subdued any spirit but that of a Jew. You must bring these things to your mind. You must place yourselves in the midst of this singular people.

Among this singular people, burning with impatient expectation, appeared Jesus of Nazareth. His first words were, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." These words we hear with little emotion; but to the Jews, who had been watching for this kingdom for ages, and who were looking for its immediate manifestation, they must have been awakening as an earthquake. Accordingly we find Jesus thronged by multitudes which no building could contain. He repairs to a mountain, as affording him advantages for addressing the crowd. I see them surrounding Him with eager looks, and ready to drink in every word from His lips. And what do I hear? Not one word of Judea, of Rome, of freedom, of conquest, of the glories of God's chosen people, and of the thronging of all nations to the temple on Mount Zion.

Almost every word was a death-blow to the hopes and feelings which glowed through the whole people, and were consecrated under the name of religion. He speaks of the long-expected kingdom of heaven; but speaks of it as a felicity promised to, and only to be partaken of by, the humble and pure in heart. The righteousness of the Pharisees, that which was deemed the perfection of religion, and which the new deliverer was expected to spread far and wide, He pronounces worthless, and declares the kingdom of heaven, or of the Messiah, to be shut against

all who do not cultivate a new, spiritual, and disinterested virtue.

Instead of war and victory He commands His impatient hearers to love, to forgive, to bless their enemies; and holds forth this spirit of benignity, mercy, peace, as the special badge of the people of the true Messiah. Instead of national interests and glories, he commands them to seek first a spirit of impartial charity and love, unconfined by the bounds of tribe or nation, and proclaims this to be the happiness and honor of the reign for which they hoped. Instead of this world's riches, which they expected to flow from all lands into their own, He commands them to lay up treasures in heaven, and directs them to an incorruptible, immortal life, as the true end of their being. Nor is this all. He does not merely offer himself as a spiritual deliverer, as the founder of a new empire of inward piety and universal charity; He closes with language announcing a more mysterious office. "Many will say unto Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from Me, ye that work iniquity." Here I meet the annunciation of a character as august as it must have been startling. I hear Him foretelling a dominion to be exercised in the future world. He begins to announce, what entered largely into His future teaching, that His power was not bounded to this earth. These words I better understand when I hear Him subsequently declaring that, after a painful death, He was to rise again and ascend to heaven, and there, in a state of preeminent power and glory, was to be the advocate and judge of the human race.

Such are some of the views given by Jesus, of His character and reign, in the Sermon on the Mount. Immediately afterwards I hear another lesson from Him, bringing out some of these truths still more strongly. A Roman centurion makes application to Him for the cure of a servant whom he particularly valued; and on expressing, in a strong manner, his conviction of the power of Jesus to heal at a distance, Jesus, according to the historian, " marvelled, and said to those that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith in Israel; and I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the children of the kingdom" (that is, the Jews) "shall be cast out."

Here all the hopes which the Jews had cherished of an exclusive or peculiar possession of the Messiah's kingdom were crushed; and the reception of the despised Gentile world to all His blessings, or, in other words, the extension of His pure religion to the ends of the earth, began to be proclaimed.

Here I pause for the present, and I ask you whether the character of Jesus be not the most extraordinary in history, and wholly inexplicable on human principles. Review the ground over which we have gone. Recollect that He was born and grew up a Jew in the midst of Jews, a people burning with one passion, and throwing their whole souls into the expectation of a national and earthly deliverer. He grew up among them in poverty, seclusion, and labors fitted to contract His thoughts, purposes, and hopes; and yet we find Him escaping every influence of education and society. We find Him as untouched by the feelings which prevailed universally around Him, which religion and patriotism concurred to consecrate, which the mother breathed into the ear of the child, and which the teacher of the synagog strengthened in the adult, as if He had been brought up in another world. We find Him conceiving a sublime purpose, such as had never dawned on sage or hero, and see Him possessed with a consciousness of sustaining a relation to God and mankind, and of being invested with powers in this world and the world to come, such as had

never entered the human mind. Whence now, I ask, came the conception of this character? Will any say it had its origin in imposture; that it was a fabrication of a deceiver? I answer, the character claimed by Christ excludes this supposition by its very nature. It was so remote from all the ideas and anticipations of the times, so unfit to awaken sympathy, so unattractive to the heathen, so exasperating to the Jew, that it was the last to enter the mind of an impostor. A deceiver of the dullest vision must have foreseen that it would expose him to Bitter scorn, abhorrence, and persecution, and that he would be left to carry on his work alone, just as Jesus always stood alone and could find not an individual to enter into His spirit and design. What allurements an unprincipled, self-seeking man could find to such an enterprise, no common ingenuity can discover.

I affirm next that the sublimity of the character claimed by Christ forbids us to trace it to imposture. That a selfish, designing, depraved mind could have formed the idea and purpose of a work unparalleled in beneficence, in vastness, and in moral grandeur, would certainly be a strange departure from the laws of the human mind. I add, that if an impostor could have lighted on the conception of so sublime and wonderful a work as that claimed by Jesus, he could not, I say, he could not have thrown into his personation of it the air of truth and reality. The part would have been too high for him. He would have overacted it or fallen short of it perpetually. His true character would have rebelled against his assumed one. We should have seen something strained, forced, artificial, awkward, showing that he was not in his true sphere. To act up to a character so singular and grand, and one for which no precedent could be found, seems to me utterly impossible for a man who had not the true spirit of it, or who was only wearing it as a mask.

Now, how stands the case with Jesus? Bred a Jewish peasant or carpenter, He issues from obscurity, and claims for Himself a divine office, a superhuman dignity, such as had not been imagined; and in no instance does He fall below the character. The peasant, and still more the Jew, wholly disappears.

We feel that a new being, of a new order of mind, is taking a part in human affairs. There is a native tone of grandeur and authority in His teaching. He speaks as a being related to the whole human race. His mind never shrinks within the ordinary limits of human agency. A narrower sphere than the world never enters His thoughts. He speaks in a natural, spontaneous style, of accomplishing the most arduous and important change in human affairs. This unlabored manner of expressing great thoughts is particularly worthy of attention. You never hear from Jesus that swelling, pompous, ostentatious language, which almost necessarily springs from an attempt to sustain a character above our powers. He talks of His glories as one to whom they were familiar, and of His intimacy and oneness with God as simply as a child speaks of his connection with his parents. He speaks of saving and judging the world, of drawing all men to Himself, and of giving everlasting life, as we speak of the ordinary powers which we exert. He makes no set harangues about the grandeur of His office and character. His consciousness of it gives a hue to His whole language, breaks out in indirect, undesigned expressions, showing that it was the deepest and most familiar of His convictions. This argument is only to be understood by reading the Gospels with a wakeful mind and heart. It does not lie on their surface, and it is the stronger for lying beneath it. When I read these books with care, when I trace the unaffected majesty which runs through the life of Jesus, and see him never falling below His sublime claims amidst poverty, and scorn, and in His last agony, I have a feeling of the reality of His character which I can not express.

I feel that the Jewish carpenter could no more have conceived and sustained this character under motives of imposture than an infant's arm could repeat the deeds of Hercules, or his unawakened intellect comprehend and rival the matchless works of genius.

Am I told that the claims of Jesus had their origin not in imposture, but in enthusiasm; that the imagination, kindled by strong feeling, overpowered the judgment so far as to give Him the notion of being destined to some strange and unparalleled work? I know that enthusiasm, or a kindled imagination, has great power; and we are never to lose sight of it, in judging of the claims of religious teachers. But I say first, that, except in cases where it amounts to insanity, enthusiasm works, in a greater or less degree, according to a man's previous conceptions and modes of thought. In Judea, where the minds of men were burning with feverish expectation of a messiah, I can easily conceive of a Jew imagining that in himself this ardent conception, this ideal of glory, was to be realized. I can conceive of his seating himself in fancy on the throne of David, and secretly pondering the means of his appointed triumphs. But that a Jew should fancy himself the Messiah, and at the same time should strip that character of all the attributes which had fired his youthful imagination and heart—that he should start aside from all the feelings and hopes of his age, and should acquire a consciousness of being destined to a wholly new career, and one as unbounded as it was now—this is exceedingly improbable; and one thing is certain that an imagination so erratic, so ungoverned, and able to generate the conviction of being destined to work so immeasurably disproportioned to the power of the individual, must have partaken of insanity.

Now, is it conceivable that an individual, mastered by so wild and fervid an imagination, should have sustained the dignity claimed by Christ, should have acted worthily the highest part ever assumed on earth? Would not his enthusiasm have broken out amidst the peculiar excitements of the life of Jesus, and have left a touch of madness on his teaching and conduct? Is it to such a man that we should look for the inculcation of a new and perfect form of virtue, and for the exemplification of humanity in its fairest form? The charge of an extravagant, self-deluding enthusiasm is the last to be fastened on Jesus. Where can we find the traces of it in His history? Do we detect them in the calm authority of His precepts; in the mild, practical and beneficial spirit of His religion; in the unlabored simplicity of the language with which He unfolds His high powers and the sublime truths of religion; or in the good sense, the knowledge of human nature, which He always discovers in His estimate and treatment of the different classes of men with whom He acted? Do we discover this enthusiasm in the singular fact that, whilst He claimed power in the future world, and always turned men's minds to Heaven, He never indulged His own imagination or stimulated that of His disciples by giving vivid pictures or any minute description of that unseen state? The truth is, that, remarkable as was the character of Jesus, it was distinguished by nothing more than by calmness and self-possession. This trait pervades His other excellences. How calm was His piety! Point me, if you can, to one vehement, passionate expression of His religious feelings. Does the Lord's Prayer breathe a feverish enthusiasm? The habitual style of Jesus on the subject of religion, if introduced into many churches of His followers at the present day, would be charged with coldness. The calm and the rational character of His piety is particularly seen in the doctrine which He so earnestly inculcates, that disinterested love and self-denying service to our fellow creatures are the most acceptable worship we can offer to our Creator. His benevolence, too, though singularly earnest and deep, was composed and serene. He never lost the possession

of Himself in His sympathy with others; was never hurried into the impatient and rash enterprises of an enthusiastic philanthropy; but did good with the tranquility and constancy which mark the providence of God. The depth of this calmness may best be understood by considering the opposition made to His claims. His labors were everywhere insidiously watched and industriously thwarted by vindictive foes who had even conspired to compass, through His death, the ruin of His cause. Now, a feverish enthusiasm which fancies itself to be intrusted with a great work of God is singularly liable to impatient indignation under furious and malignant opposition. Obstacles increase its vehemence; it becomes more eager and hurried in the accomplishment of its purposes, in proportion as they are withstood. Be it therefore remembered that the malignity of Christ's foes, though never surpassed, and for the time triumphant, never robbed Him of self-possession, roused no passion, and threw no vehemence or precipitation into His exertions. He did not disguise from Himself or His followers the impression made on the multitude by His adversaries. He distinctly foresaw the violent death towards which He was fast approaching. Yet, confiding in God and in the silent progress of His truth, He possessed His soul in peace. Not only was He calm, but His calmness rises into sublimity when we consider the storms which raged around Him and the vastness of the prospects in which His spirit found repose. I say then that serenity and self-possession were peculiarly the attributes of Jesus. I affirm that the singular and sublime character claimed by Jesus can be traced neither to imposture nor to an ungoverned, insane imagination. It can only be accounted for by its truth, its reality.

I began with observing how our long familiarity with Jesus blunts our minds to His singular excellence. We probably have often read of the character which He claimed, without a thought of its extraordinary nature. But I know nothing so sublime. The plans and labors of statesmen sink into the sports of children when compared with the work which Jesus announced, and to which He devoted Himself in life and death with a thorough consciousness of its reality. The idea of changing the moral aspect of the whole earth, of recovering all nations to the pure and inward worship of one God and to a spirit of divine and fraternal love, was one of which we meet not a trace in philosopher or legislator before Him. The human mind had given no promise of this extent of view. The conception of this enterprise, and the calm, unshaken expectation of success in one who had no station and no wealth, who cast from Him the sword with abhorrence, and who forbade His disciples to use any weapons but those of love, discover a wonderful trust in the power of God and the power of love; and when to this we add that Jesus looked not only to the triumph of His pure faith in the present world, but to a mighty and beneficent power in Heaven, we witness a vastness of purpose, a grandeur of thought and feeling so original, so superior to the workings of all other minds, that nothing but our familiarity can prevent our contemplation of it with wonder and profound awe.

Here is the most striking view of Jesus. This combination of the spirit of humanity, in its lowliest, tenderest form, with the consciousness of unrivaled and divine glories, is the most wonderful distinction of this wonderful character. Here we learn the chief reason why He chose poverty and refused every peculiarity of manner and appearance. He did this because He desired to come near to the multitude of men, to make Himself accessible to all, to pour out the fulness of His sympathy upon all, to know and weep over their sorrows and sins, and to manifest His interest in their affections and joys.

I can offer but a few instances of this sympathy of Christ with human nature in all its varieties of character and condition. But how beautiful are they! At the very opening of His ministry we find Him present at a marriage to which He and His disciples had been called. Among the Jews this was an occasion of peculiar exhilaration and festivity; but Jesus did not therefore decline it. He knew what affections, joys, sorrows, and moral influences are bound up in this institution, and He went to the celebration, not as an ascetic, to frown on its bright hopes and warm congratulations, but to sanction it by His presence and to heighten its enjoyments.

How little does this comport with the solitary dignity which we should have pronounced most accordant with His character, and what a spirit of humanity does it breathe! But this event stands almost alone in His history. His chief sympathy was not with them that rejoice, but with the ignorant, sinful, sorrowful; and with these we find Him cultivating an habitual intimacy. though so exalted in thought and purpose, He chose uneducated men to be His chief disciples; and He lived with them, not as a superior, giving occasional and formal instruction, but became their companion traveled with them on foot, slept in their dwellings, sat at their tables, partook of their plain fare, communicated to them His truth in the simplest form; and though they constantly misunderstood Him and never perceived His full meaning, He was never wearied with teaching them. So familiar was His intercourse that we find Peter reproving Him with an affectionate zeal for announcing His approaching death, and we find John leaning on His bosom. Of His last discourse to these disciples I need not speak. It stands alone among all writings for the union of tenderness and majesty. His own sorrows are forgotten in His solicitude to speak peace and comfort to His humble followers. The depth of His human sympathies was beautifully manifested when children were brought Him. His disciples, judging as all men would judge, thought that He was sent to wear the crown of universal empire, had too great a work before Him to give His time and attention to children, and reproved the parents who brought them; but Jesus, rebuking His disciples, called to Him the children. Never, I believe, did childhood awaken such deep love as at that moment. He took them in His arms and blest them, and not only said that "of such was the kingdom of heaven," but added, "He that receiveth a little child in My name, receiveth Me;" so entirely did He identify Himself with this primitive, innocent, beautiful form of human nature.

There was no class of human beings so low as to be beneath His sympathy. He not merely taught the publican and sinner, but, with all His consciousness of purity, sat down and dined with them, and, when reproved by the malignant Pharisee for such companionship, answered by the touching parables of the Lost Sheep and the Prodigal Son, and said, "I am come to seek and to save that which was lost." No personal suffering dried up this fountain of love in His breast. On His way to the cross He heard some women of Jerusalem bewailing Him, and at the sound, forgetting His own grief, He turned to them and said, "Women of Jerusalem, weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves and your children." On the cross, whilst His mind was divided between intense suffering and the contemplation of the infinite blessings in which His sufferings were to issue, His eye lighted on His mother and John, and the sensibilities of a son and a friend mingled with the sublime consciousness of the universal Lord and Savior. Never before did natural affection find so tender and beautiful an utterance. To His mother He said, directing her to John, "Behold thy son; I leave My beloved disciple to take My place, to perform My filial offices, and to enjoy a share of that affection with which you have followed Me through life;" and to John He said, "Behold thy mother; I bequeath to you the happiness of ministering to My dearest earthly friend." Nor is this all. The spirit

of humanity had one higher triumph. Whilst His enemies surrounded Him with a malignity unsoftened by His last agonies, and, to give the keenest edge to insult, reminded Him scoffingly of the high character and office which He had claimed, His only notice of them was the prayer, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

Thus Jesus lived with men; with the consciousness of unutterable majesty He joined a lowliness, gentleness, humanity, and sympathy, which have no example in human history. I ask you to contemplate this wonderful union. In proportion to the superiority of Jesus to all around Him was the intimacy, the brotherly love, with which He bound Himself to them. I maintain that this is a character wholly remote from human conception. To imagine it to be the production of imposture or enthusiasm shows a strange unsoundness of mind. I contemplate it with a veneration second only to the profound awe with which I look up to God. It bears no mark of human invention. It was real. It belonged to and it manifested the beloved Son of God. But I have not done. May I ask your attention a few moments more? We have not yet reached the depth of Christ's character. We have not touched the great principle on which His wonderful sympathy was founded, and which endeared to Him His office of universal Savior. Do you ask what this deep principle was? I answer, it was His conviction of the greatness of the human soul. He saw in man the impress and image of the Divinity, and therefore thirsted for his redemption, and took the tenderest interest in him, whatever might be the rank, character, or condition in which he was found. This spiritual view of man pervades and distinguishes the teaching of Christ.

Jesus looked on men with an eye which pierced beneath the material frame. The body vanished before Him. The trappings of the rich, the rags of the poor, were nothing to Him. He looked through them, as though they did not exist, to the soul; and there, amidst clouds of ignorance and plague-spots of sin, He recognized a spiritual and immortal nature, and the germs of power and perfection which might be unfolded forever. In the most fallen and depraved man He saw a being who might become an angel of light.

Still more, He felt that there was nothing in Himself to which men might not ascend. His own lofty consciousness did not sever Him from the multitude; for He saw in His own greatness the model of what men might become. So deeply was He thus impressed that, again and again, in speaking of His future glories, He announced that in these His true followers were to share. They were to sit on His throne and partake of His beneficent power.

Here I pause, and indeed I know not what can be added to heighten the wonder, reverence, and love which are due to Jesus. When I consider Him, not only as possessed with the consciousness of an unexampled and unbounded majesty, but as recognizing a kindred nature in human beings, and living and dying to raise them to a participation of His divine glories; and when I see Him under these views allying Himself to men by the tenderest ties, embracing them with a spirit of humanity which no insult, injury, or pain could for a moment repel or overpower, I am filled with wonder as well as reverence and love. I feel that this character is not of human invention, that it was not assumed through fraud, or struck out by enthusiasm; for it is infinitely above their reach. When I add this character of Jesus to the other evidences of His religion, it gives to what before seemed so strange a new and a vast accession of strength; I feel as if I could not be deceived. The Gospels must be true; they were drawn from a living original; they were founded on reality. The character of Jesus is not a fiction; He was what He claimed to be, and what His followers attested.

Nor is this all. Jesus not only was, He is still the Son of God, the Savior of the world. He exists now; He has entered that heaven to which He always looked forward on earth. There He lives and reigns. With a clear, calm faith I see Him in that state of glory; and I confidently expect, at no distant period, to see Him face to face. We have indeed no absent friend whom we shall so surely meet.

Let us then, my hearers, by imitation of His virtues and obedience to His word, prepare ourselves to join Him in those pure mansions where He is surrounding Himself with the good and pure of our race, and will communicate to them forever His own spirit, power, and joy.

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