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*"He Is Altogether Lovely."*

## The Moral Perfection of Christ



IN A LETTER published after his death, the poet Robert Browning cited several utterances of men of genius concerning the Christian faith, and among them was this one from Charles Lamb: "In a gay fancy with some friends as to how they would feel if some of the greatest of the dead were to appear suddenly in flesh and blood once more—on the final suggestion, 'And if Christ entered this room?' he changed his manner at once and stuttered out as his manner was when moved, 'You see if Shakespeare entered we should all rise; if HE appeared, we must kneel.'" Such was his conception of the moral glory of Christ.

A similar impression was produced on a brilliant Brahmin scholar. Disturbed by the progress of the Christian faith among his own people, he determined to do all in his power to arrest it. His plan was to prepare for widespread distribution a brochure highlighting the weaknesses and failings of Christ, and exposing the fallacy of believing in Him.

For eleven years he diligently studied the New Testament,

searching for inconsistencies in Christ's character and teaching. Not only did he fail to discover any, but he became convinced that the one he sought to discredit was what He claimed to be, the Son of God. The scholar boldly confessed his faith.

The moral perfection of Christ impresses itself on the thoughtful reader of the gospels. In them the evangelists present the portrait of a Man, a real Man, who displays perfection at every stage of development and in every circumstance of life. This is the more remarkable, as He did not immure Himself in some secluded cloister but mixed freely and naturally with the imperfect men of His own generation. So deeply involved in the life of the ordinary people did He become that His democratic tendencies earned the most bitter criticism of the sanctimonious Pharisees.

And yet there was a sense in which He was so ordinary that many of His contemporaries saw Him only as "the carpenter's son," a despised Nazarene. With eyes blinded by sin and self-will, they saw no beauty in Him that they should desire Him (Isaiah 53:2). To all except those with eyes enlightened by love and faith, His moral grandeur and divine glory passed unnoticed. The shallow crowds were deceived by the entire absence of pomp and show.

### *Symmetry of Character*

The character of our Lord was wonderfully balanced, with neither excess nor deficiency. Its excellence is recognized not only

by Christians but also by Jews and others of many forms of unbelief. It stands out faultlessly perfect, so symmetrical in all its proportions that its strength and greatness are not immediately obvious to the casual observer. It has been said that in Jesus' character no strong points were obvious because there were no weak ones. Strong points necessarily presuppose weak ones, but no weaknesses can be alleged of Him. In the best of men there is obvious inconsistency and inequality, and since the tallest bodies cast the longest shadows, the greater the man, the more glaring his faults are likely to be. With Christ it was far otherwise. He was without flaw or contradiction.

Virtue readily degenerates into vice. Courage may degenerate into cowardice on the one hand or rashness on the other. Purity may slip into either prudery or impurity. The pathway to virtue is narrow and slippery, but in our Lord there was no deflection. Throughout His earthly life He maintained every virtue unsullied.

In speech as in silence His perfect balance of character was displayed. He never spoke when it would have been wiser to remain silent, never kept silence when He should have spoken. Mercy and judgment blended in all His actions and judgments, yet neither prevailed at the expense of the other. Exact truth and infinite love adorned each other in His winsome personality, for He always spoke the truth in love. His severe denunciations of apostate Jerusalem were tremulous with His sobs (Matthew 23:37). True to His own counsel, He manifested the prudence of the serpent and the simplicity of the dove. His tremendous inner strength never

degenerated into mere obstinacy. He mastered the difficult art of displaying sympathy without surrendering principle.

The excellences of both sexes coalesced in Him. But while possessing all the gentler graces of womanhood He could never be regarded as effeminate. Indeed, he was linked in popular thought with the rugged Elijah, and the austere John the Baptist (Matthew 16:14). There is contrast yet not contradiction in His delicacy and gentleness in handling people who merited such treatment, and the blistering denunciations He poured on the hypocrites and parasites.

Another distinctive feature is that our Lord's character was complete in itself. "He entered on life with anything but a passionless simplicity of nature; yet it was a complete and finished character, with entire moral adulthood." Most men are notable for one conspicuous virtue or grace—Moses for meekness, Job for patience, John for love. But in Jesus you find everything. He is always consistent in Himself. No act or word contradicts anything that has gone before. The character of Christ is one and the same throughout. "He makes no improvements, prunes no extravagances, returns from no eccentricities. Its balance is never disturbed or readjusted."

### *Uniqueness of Character*

The uniqueness of Christ is demonstrated most clearly in the things that every other great human teacher has done, but that He did not do.

No word He spoke needed to be modified or withdrawn, because He never spoke inadvisedly or fell into the evil of exaggeration. No half-truth or misstatement ever crossed His lips. He who was the Truth spoke the whole truth, and no occasion arose for modification or retraction of His spoken word.

He never apologized for word or action. And yet, is it not true that the ability to apologize is one of the elements of true greatness? It is the small-souled man who will not stoop to apologize. But Christ performed no action, spoke no word that required apology.

He confessed no sin. The holiest men of all ages have been the most abject in their confession of shortcoming and failure. Read for example the classic diary of Andrew A. Bonar, the Scottish saint. But no admission of failure to live up to the highest divine standards fell from Jesus' lips. On the contrary, He invited the closest investigation and scrutiny of His life by friend or foe. "Which of you convinceth me of sin?" He challenged (John 8:46). His life was an open book. Nothing He did was done in secret. He shouted His criticisms from the housetops. No other life could have survived the virulent criticism of His enemies, but He emerged with reputation untarnished.

Because that was the case, He never asked for pardon. Nowhere is it indicated that He ever felt remorse, or exhibited any fear of future penalty. He admonished His disciples when they prayed to say, "Forgive us our debts," but He never took those words on His own lips, because He owed no debts, either moral or spiritual.

He never sought advice from even the wisest men of His day. All other great leaders had those with whom they consulted, even Moses and Solomon. On the rare occasions on which well-meaning friends tendered advice to Jesus, He rejected it, as for example when His mother reminded Him of the failing wine at the wedding feast (John 2:4–5).

He was at no pains to justify ambiguous conduct, as for example, when He lay sleeping in the stern of the boat in the midst of a raging storm, apparently indifferent to the fears of His companions. Jesus volunteered no explanation, offered no apology (Mark 4:37–41). His delay in responding to the urgent appeal of the two sisters when Lazarus was ill was equally open to misunderstanding. We would have been unable to refrain from explaining and justifying our seeming neglect, but He was content to leave the passage of time and the unfolding of His Father's plan to vindicate His enigmatical actions (John 11:3, 6, 21, 32, 37).

Finally, He never asked or permitted prayer for Himself. True, He invited His three intimates to watch with Him, but not to pray for Him. Their prayer was to be for themselves lest they enter into temptation (Matthew 26:36–46).

### ***Combination of Characteristics***

There have been men who have lived two lives, one open to the scrutiny of all, the other hidden from their fellowmen. In His one person, Jesus possessed two natures that were manifested and exhibited simultaneously. Certain qualities that seldom coexist in

the same person combined without incongruity in Him.

A strange admixture of dependence and independence was observable in the life of the Master. Although conscious that He had at His disposal every resource, human and divine, He yet craved the solace of human company and sympathy. He exhibited a sublime independence of the praise or censure of the crowd, yet the companionship of His inner circle of friends was warmly appreciated.

Joyousness and seriousness blended in Him in perfect naturalness. The tender words of His farewell discourse are shot through with "an inexpressible sadness of joy" (John 15:11; 16:20, 33). He was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3), yet the One Who was "anointed with the oil of gladness above His fellows" (Hebrews 1:9).

Although there is no record of our Lord laughing, He leaves the very opposite impression to that of gloom or austerity. Otto Borchert maintains that "fun and humor found no place in Jesus' life, because the strain induced by the sin of the world was too great." He poses the question: "Did He ever actually laugh?" Surely if He was anointed by God with the oil of gladness above His contemporaries there must have been room for holy laughter. It is unthinkable that He constantly paraded His sorrows, poignant though they were. The gospels unite to present a man winsome, radiant, and irresistibly attractive.

Perhaps the most arresting of these combinations of qualities was that of His majesty and humility. Though always meek and

lowly (Luke 22:27; Philippians 2:5–8), on occasion His divine majesty blazed through the veil of His humanity, as on the occasion of His arrest, when He said to the soldiers, “I AM,” and “they went backward, and fell to the ground” (John 18:6; see also John 7:46; 10:39). The simultaneous manifestation of both qualities is seen on the occasion of the foot washing. The utter humility of Christ is highlighted by the fact that it was in the full consciousness that “the Father had given all things into His hand, and that He was come from God and went to God,” that He took a towel and washed His followers’ dirty feet (John 13:3–5).

The wonder of the unity and uniqueness of His character is the more amazing since He had so short a time in which to work out what have been termed “the tremendous contradictions and collisions of His vast soul.” He was surely Lord of Himself and of all besides.

To sum up, “*He is altogether lovely.*” Every element of moral and spiritual beauty resides in Him. In a painting by Michelangelo, Christ is depicted sitting with other men, but the artist has been careful to ensure that it is on His face the light most strongly falls. The same impression is conveyed in the word pictures of the four gospels. In the succeeding chapters it will be our task to examine the glorious colors that emanate from the prism of His holy person and redemptive work.

*I'd sing the character He bears,  
And all the forms of love He wears,  
Exalted on His throne.  
In loftiest songs of sweetest praise,  
I would to everlasting days  
Make all His glories known.*