LIFTING HIM UP Sermon for February 19

[Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=19#hebrew_reading)

[Psalm 119:33-40](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=19#psalm_reading)

[1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=19#epistle_reading)

[Matthew 5:38-48](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=19#gospel_reading)

We've spent the last three Sundays reading through chapter five of the Gospel of Matthew, and today's reading brings that chapter to a conclusion. As we pointed our before, the Gospel of Matthew is the preeminent teaching Gospel, in that it tells us what Christ taught about how to live in the world; it tells us, not so much about who Christ was, but about who we are to be. So it’s important not to approach it as a theological treatise, but rather as something like a field guide, a book with maps showing us how to make our way through a dark wood.

And you'll recall that the chapter began with what we nowadays refer to as the Beatitudes, the list of character traits that Christ teaches us are the model that His followers should aspire towards, that they should try to cultivate in themselves.

And you’ll remember that the reason we narrowed our focus in this way to what came first is because we were following the rule that Jesus articulates in many different places: that the first matter of concern in the Christian life must always be with the foundation. Thus if you make the tree good, the fruit will take care of itself; if you make the eye good, the whole body will be illuminated; if the soil is good, the plants will grow. The same point, over and over again: if the foundation is like a rock, the house above will be secure.

And so we went on to ask: How do we acquire this poverty of spirit, or perhaps a better way of putting it: How to we cultivate this poverty of Spirit in ourselves? And once we asked this question in this way, lo and behold, we found exactly what you would expect to find in a field guide: the Sermon on the Mount itself contains, or at least suggests, various practical exercises we might try, things we might do to coax it out of hiding, so to speak, and to begin to make us comfortable with it, with how it feels, with how others might react to it, or, perhaps more importantly, with how others might fail to react to it, might not even notice it.

And following that field guide, we made two suggestions for how we might begin our pursuit of this fundamentally important quality of character. One was to do three good deeds in a week, deeds that we would not otherwise have done, and not tell anyone about them, ever, even by sneaking them in through humble bragging, and most especially not tell the recipient of the deeds. The other was that we refrain from boasting for a day, from even the most subtle forms of boasting, like criticizing others.

The subject matter which that first look at the Sermon of the Mount opened up for us is the profoundly interesting area of the relationship between character and behavior, from a Christian point of view. That relationship is obviously complex.

There is certainly no doubt that it is the New Testament expectation that those who sincerely regard themselves as His followers would lead lives that are in harmony with those who see themselves as recipient's of Christ's redeeming grace. As Jim elaborated on in his last message, Christ's command is that we let the light of our own lives shine before others; and Sheryl likewise explored the Christian expectationthat we are to make our lives a form of worship, with all that entails.

And now today, when we reach the end of chapter five, we find a whole list of explicit behaviors, things to do or not to do: do not strike back if someone strikes you; if someone forces you to do something, do even more than he requires of you; when someone asks you for something, give it to him. Embrace your enemies, show them your love, pray for them.

So clearly thee is a close and intimate connection between Christian character and Christian behavior.

But being agreed on that returs us to the question of the nature of that relationship open. Does one have, so to speak, Christian priority over the other, or is it more of a chicken-or-egg situation, a problem for which there is no solution?

What we argued a few weeks back was that Christ's answer is that character has priority. The Beatitudes, coming at the very beginning of Christ's great teaching sermon, are all about character, about how to be rather than what to do. And now here again, in a verse that He uses to summarize all that's come before, Christ closes with the same point: "You therefore must be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect." (v.48). Be perfect, not act perfectly. Be perfect.

But there's another approach we can take to the issue when we really think honestly about what Christ is asking us to do here, right before he says we must be perfect. "Love your enemies," he tells us. And all our human instincts and all our human observation and experience surely urge us to protest: "Love my enemies? That's impossible!"

I can vividly remember once when I was a kid in grade school. There was this other kid and he was what these days people would call a bully. One afternoon he did something really underhanded and he and I got into a fight on the school yard. We were going at it pretty good and I'm afraid he was getting the better of it when somebody came and broke it up and the two of us got hauled into the principal's office. Aside from having a bloody nose or whatever my injuries, I can remember being morally outraged that the principal treated us both as equally responsible, and even worse, that he made us shake hands. The sneer on that little's villain's face while we were shaking hands still haunts my dreams.

Now of course I could say all sorts of pious things about it, but the reality is that I could no more love him today than I could have done that afternoon sixty years ago.

And I don't think I'm exceptional in this respect. I've told some of you before about the day a few years back when that crazy shooter in Colorado who dressed up like the Joker and opened fire in a movie theater, killing a dozen people. The news had just broken and a woman came into the post office where I was working. She was clearly distraught and almost shaking, and she told me: "I think I'm a good Christian, but I hope and pray that (so-and-so) burns in hell!"

And so it’s a very legitimate and honest protest to make when Christ tells us: "You must love your enemies": I can't. I just can't do that. I can pretend and make all the religious sounding noises, but I just can’t. And to be completely honest, I don't even want to be able to do it, especially when I'm in the right and my enemy is wrong! You're asking me, Jesus, to be somebody i cannot be, and even if I could be, I do not want to be. You're asking the impossible.

To which Christ's own answer is: "I know. I know it's impossible for you. That's why I came."

In the third chapter of the gospel of John, a teacher of the Jews named Nicodemus visits Jesus and says, in essence, "The things you've been doing are so amazing. How does all that happen?" And Jesus immediately cuts to the heart of the matter in his response. He turns the focus from his actions - the various miracles Nicodemus was asking about - to what must come before the miracles even become relevant. He says: "...unless he is born again..." a person cannot even see the Kingdom of God. And then later on at the end of the conversation, Jesus explains this phenomenon of 'being born again' by drawing upon an illustration from the Old Testament. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." (3:14)

And there we have it, as plainly as it can be said. We are born again when and only when Christ is elevated above all else in our lives.

We read the Sermon on the Mount so that we can find out what Christ taught. But why should we care what He taught? And especially when he teaches things that run so contrary to our natural inclinations: when he tells us to strive to be mournful, to be meek, to be merciful, to be poor in spirit. When I made the suggestion of doing good deeds in utter secrecy as a way of striving for poverty of spirit, a perfectly natural answer is: But why is it necessary to strive for such a spirit? Surely God cares about the good deed itself, whatever my motives might be? And so a little pat on the back for me surely does no harm, and it feels so good, and since God loves me, He surely wants me to feel good about myself.

But Beloved, if, then, we turn back to our Sermon on the Mount, and we discover that that is not what Jesus teaches, that he teaches that our actions, even the best of them, are spiritually meaningless, except insofar as they derive from a right spirit within us, whom do we rush to defend: Christ, or ourselves?.

As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 13: *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all the mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothings. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." (1-3)*

What matters first and foremost is always one's spirit, and our spirit, to even begin the never-ending process of becoming perfect, as God is perfect, must always be born again, born from above, through the willful acceptance of Jesus as our Savior - the one who made the journey possible - and as our Lord - the one who provides guidance and assistance.

And now there is only one answer left, and that is in fact Christ's answer. You can only care what Jesus taught provided you have turned over to Him authority in your life, provided you have lifted Him up over yourself, and invited His Spirit to provide guidance, and to begin from there the process of transformation.

When we walk into a college classroom to study biology, we voluntarily hand over authority to the professor to help us to understand and to grade our progress.

Just so, when we accept Christ, we grant Him authority in the classroom of our lives.

And so, gracious Lord, we pray this morning for the courage necessary to acknowledge our own helplessness. We pray for true humility, the kind of humility that is not proud of itself. We ask for lives free from hypocrisy and guile, because we know from your word that that their presence in our lives undermines at its very foundation our commitment to the authority of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.