

The Spiritual Life: 2. Character

Mark 10:35-45

February 11, 2018

Pastor Steve Richards

There was a football game in town last weekend. Maybe you saw it. But there was something else that the Super Bowl brought to town last weekend, and it was televised last Saturday night. It's the NFL's version of the Academy Awards. Turns out there are football awards for all sorts of things – who knew there was an award for the best play of the season. How do you compete for that? Then the predictable awards – best lineman, best receiver, best coach, and finally – the Walter Payton award. Every team nominates a player that they feel has had a significant positive impact on his community. And it was interesting to me that this was the final award, football's equivalent to the best picture of the year, someone immortalized at least until next year's award - to show us that a professional football player can have a significant positive impact outside the world of sports. And this year's winner was J J Watt, defensive end for the Houston Texans. I don't follow that much football, but I knew the name J J Watt, but not from football.

Do you remember what happened in Houston last August? It was the kind of devastation no one expected, and for JJ Watt this was his adopted home town. So on August 27, he turned to Twitter and sent out a tweet that directed people to a fundraising site with a goal of raising \$200,000 for relief efforts. Three weeks later he closed the fundraising portion of the relief effort. The total amount raised was nowhere close to \$200,000 but \$37 million contributed by 209,000 people. Why did total strangers trust J J Watt as the conduit for their generosity? The same reason he received the Walter Payton award last Saturday night. Character. He was active in the Houston community long before Hurricane Harvey arrived. He did not just write checks to local non-profits, he personally participated in their events and outreach programs. After the Hurricane struck, but before starting this fundraising effort, he was seen unloading relief supplies and assisting in shelters. Who he is on the outside is who he is on the inside. Character.

In 1729, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was mentoring a group of students at Oxford. They asked for his help to be more deeply committed to Christ, to be authentic Christians. Wesley put together a list of 21 or 22 questions, and said that as you ask the questions it is a way of examining your own heart and if you are practicing these things you will grow in faith. Last Sunday, we listed seven questions. This morning, you will find seven more questions – most of them relate to character: Am I proud? Do I grumble or complain constantly? Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits? Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?

As I thought about Christian character, I was drawn back to a book that I read a couple of years ago that also became the basis for a sermon series. The book is *The Road to Character* by David Brooks, a columnist with the New York Times. He begins the book by referencing the first three chapters of Genesis and the two different pictures and messages we are given of creation. In Genesis 1, we find the more poetic story where each day God says, "Let there be light. Let there be water. Let there be plant life. And at the end of each day, God looks at all God created and says it is good. And then on the sixth day, we are given the culminating act where God creates human life. God says, "Let us create man in our image." God spoke human life into existence in God's image and God looks at what God has created and says it is good. The essence of who we are is made in the image of God, reflecting the qualities of God, and when we get to the New Testament, Paul tells us those character qualities are fruit of the spirit love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) The closer we get to God, the more these qualities come to the surface.

In Genesis 2-3, we are given a different story in narrative form. God creates human life from the dust of the earth, breathes into him the breath of life and places him in a garden paradise. But then God realizes it is not good for the man to be alone. He needs a helper and companion and so God takes a rib from the man's side and makes a new and improved version that God calls woman. And now there are two in this garden that has been created for their pleasure. They can have it all except for one tree that stands in the middle. It is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God says, "That one tree belongs to me and me alone and if you try to eat the fruit from that tree you will die." But the serpent says, "God didn't mean that! If you eat the fruit you will become like God." Who can resist that? So Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and paradise is lost.

We are given two pictures of humanity. The first is good – reflects the image of God. And the second desires to be as great as God, ambitious, selfish, all about me, quick to blame others. Two pictures. And David Brooks says both Adams live in our hearts, and I think he's right. Within us is a God-given desire to do good, and there is also this temptation to focus on me above all else. Do whatever you need to do to get ahead. As a result, we tend to measure people by their net worth or what they've accomplished or how popular they are. And life ends up being about achievements. That's where we live. We know that Adam! But where do you go to live out a life that reflects the image of God? It's here, isn't it? We come here to remember who we are and why we exist and what guides us. We invite God to form us and shape us. I like the words of twentieth century theologian, Teilhard de Chardin: ***You are not a human being in search of a spiritual experience. You are a spiritual being immersed in a human experience.*** That's why the spiritual life is so essential. Last Sunday, we looked at this. Spiritual life is a relationship with God that shapes us into the person that God intends us to be. After last Sunday, I had a conversation with someone about just how hard it is to relinquish control so that God can shape us. It's character development. And becoming the better Adam, I don't do that on my own. I've got get close to the one who created me. I do that through a kind of prayer that acknowledges God is with me every moment so that everything I do is an expression of my devotion to God. Being the person God made me to be.

And that's what Wesley was doing with his questions: Am I proud? Do I grumble or complain constantly? Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits? Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying? (Or Boy Scouts, isn't there a scout law? Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, reverent.) I can't do that on my own. I need other people in my life who are also wanting to be that better Adam.

Like many of you, I am concerned about the direction of our country. I'm not saying that as a Republican or a Democrat but as a citizen of this nation. I often think of the opening words of our Constitution: We, the people... It reminds me that I have a personal responsibility. Last week, I was reading an article in one of the Christian publications that I receive and the author was asking could it be that what we see is a reflection of "We, the people." We hear ways of speaking about people that feels wrong but some simply dismiss the words, others get angry – and we are left with a kind of societal malaise. What is the character of this nation? Which Adam are we trying to be?

In Mark 10, Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem where the disciples are counting on Jesus becoming king. This will be the climactic moment. They've just entered Jerusalem. They are so excited they can hardly stand it. This is it! But what they don't know is

that Jesus is six days from being arrested and executed. What they know is Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus has been telling them that this will not go the way they think it will. Over and over again, he tells them, I will be arrested and killed. But Peter said, “No, Jesus that will never happen and if anyone tries to hurt you they’ll have to deal with me first.” And Jesus replies, “Get behind me, Satan. You don’t understand.”

Jesus kept trying to explain but they didn’t get it, and now six days from his arrest, they entered Jericho. The next stop is Jerusalem. The other ten disciples are off doing something else and Jesus is alone when James and John approach Jesus thinking he’s about to become king. And they say, “Jesus, we have a favor to ask. When you become king, let us sit on your left and right. We would be great at these positions. You’ve see us in action. We’re ready.” It’s an understandable request. They had left everything to follow Jesus, to walk with him. Unlike a lot of people, they believe Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the great leader who would come in, raise up an army, kick out the Romans and set up Israel as the most powerful nation in the world. They want greatness! And Jesus replies, “Do you even know what you are asking? Are you able to drink from the cup?” “Well, of course, we want to drink from the king’s cup. That’s why we want to be on your left and right.” And Jesus says sadly, “You will drink from it.” What is this cup? It is suffering and death. And that’s exactly what will happen to them – their prayer will be answered, and like most of the other disciples and a countless host of believers throughout the centuries, they will put their lives on the line because they believe.

Which Adam is driving James and John in this moment? Ambition, success, wanting to get ahead of the other ten, secure their place in history. Power. When the other ten show up and realize what is happening, they say, “James and John, you scoundrels, what are you doing?” Why are they so angry? Because James and John got there first! Which Adam is motivating the ten?

A few days later at what would be their Last Supper together, Luke tells us the disciples are whispering around the table about which one of them is the greatest. And again, Jesus is heart-broken. “Three years, I’ve been talking to you about this and you still don’t get it.” In John’s gospel, Jesus gets up from the table and gets down on his knees and washes his disciples’ feet. You want greatness? I’m showing you greatness. And in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says: **“Whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”** (Matthew 20:28) And then Jesus lays down his life for them – and for you and me. Lord, help us. Help us to get close enough to you that we lay down our lives to be the persons with the inner character that you want us to be.

There’s a story that you’ve probably heard. It’s often attributed to a Native American tradition. A grandfather is teaching his grandson about life, and he says to the boy: “A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight, and it is between two wolves. One is evil. He is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, superiority, and ego.” And he continued, “The other is good. He is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, generosity, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too.” And the grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?” And his grandfather said, “The one you feed.”

Which are you feeding? Just the fact that you are here today leads me to believe you want to be the better Adam.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of February 11, 2018

Weekly Prayer: Creator of the universe, thank you for the gift of life you've entrusted to us. Help us find security in you and free us from the need to feel superior. We want to follow you and serve you in this world. God, bless us and speak to us again. Amen.

Monday, February 12 - Day 36: Legacy

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-21

"Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven, where moth and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Observation: Jesus points out the difference between two sorts of treasure. His use of heaven in this passage means where God is right now, and where, if you learn to love and serve God right now, you will have treasure in the present, not just in the future. Jesus wanted his followers to establish heavenly treasure right now, treasure which they could enjoy in the present as well as the future, treasure that wasn't subject to the problems that we might try to store here on earth. The entire chapter is devoted to how best to do that, i.e. get your priorities right.

Application: The greatest legacy a person can leave is a complete surrender of their life to Jesus Christ. Don't hold out on God! Every prayer you pray, every gift you give, every sacrifice you make, and every step of faith you take is an inheritance left to the next generation. Your prayers live on.

Prayer: Eternal God, thank you that you are not bound by limitations of time and distance, but you are faithful to work through us long after our earthly life has ended. Help me to live each day as an investment in your plan. Amen.

Growing Deeper: Am I defeated in any part of my life?

Tuesday, February 13 - Day 37: Prayer Contracts

Scripture: Matthew 18:18

I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven.

Observation: Our prayers are linked to God's promises. The word *bind* has a legal connotation. It means "to place a contract on something." This is precisely what happens when we pray in the will of God. Our prayers place a contract in the spiritual realm. *Bind* also means "to tie together." Something powerful happens when we agree in prayer. Our faith is multiplied. Finally, the word *bind* means "to chain." Our most powerful prayers are chained to the promises of God. In the Old Testament, *bind* was taken literally, as they attached Scripture to body parts as a constant reminder.

Application: The purpose of prayer is not to get what you want; the goal of prayer is to discern what God wants, what God wills. But if our prayer is in the will of God, then it is backed by the full authority of the King and his kingdom.

Prayer: Lord, I am listening. Help me to have the patience to wait and the wisdom to discern what you want, so that I may be bound to your good and perfect will for my life. Amen.

Growing Deeper: Do I go to bed on time and get up on time?

Wednesday, February 14 - Day 38: Climb the Watchtower

Scripture: Habakkuk 1:11, 2:1

He passes through like the wind and invades; but he will be held guilty, the one whose strength is his god.

I will take my post; I will position myself on the fortress. I will keep watch to see what the Lord says to me and how he will respond to my complaint.

Observation: Watchtowers served a variety of purposes in ancient culture – as built-in defense systems in the walls of cities, as pastures so shepherds could protect their flocks, and as vineyards for protection from thieves. Watchmen would climb into their watchtower and scan the horizon for enemy armies or trading caravans. The watchmen were the first to see, and they saw the farthest. When we pray, we see sooner and see farther in the spiritual realm because prayer gives us a unique vantage point.

Application: Where you pray is not significant. The Israelites pitched the tent of meeting outside the camp. Jesus prayed on mountain, by water, and in gardens. We need to find a place where we are free from distraction, where we get good reception, where we can focus, and where our faith is strong. Where do you feel closest to God? How can you create that “space” where you are now?

Prayer: God, you are present in the world around me, ready to make a deeper connection in my life. Help me to recall those moments when I have felt especially close to you. Quiet my heart. Let me hear what you have for me today. Amen.

Growing Deeper: Do I grumble or complain constantly?

Thursday, February 15 - Day 39: Holy Ground

Scripture: Exodus 3:1-5

Moses was taking care of the flock for his father-in-law Jethro, Midian's priest. He led his flock out to the edge of the desert, and he came to God's mountain called Horeb. The LORD's messenger appeared to him in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was in flames, but it didn't burn up. Then Moses said to himself, Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn't burning up. When the LORD saw that he was coming to look, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" Moses said, "I'm here." Then the LORD said, "Don't come any closer! Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground."

Observation: If Moses had ever dreamed of delivering the people of Israel out of captivity, that dream died when he killed an Egyptian guard and fled the country as a fugitive. Moses spend forty years in spiritual exile, tending sheep, until one day God appeared to him in a burning bush. Why a burning bush? To show that no place is devoid of God's presence, not even a bush in the desert (a desert, both literally and figuratively). It does not matter where you are. God can meet you anywhere.

Application: Why did God ask Moses to take off his sandals? Was it an act of humility or worship? Maybe it was a way of acknowledging absolute dependence on God and a way of removing any obstacle that could get in the way of God and Moses connecting. That space is holy ground. Where have you found holy ground? What barrier is keeping your present space from being holy ground?

Prayer: Lord God, as you came to Moses in the midst of an ordinary yet unexpected place, help me to be ready to meet with you wherever I am. Draw me to “holy ground” so that I am totally and completely available to you. Amen.

Growing Deeper: Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits?

Friday, February 16 - Day 40: Prayer

Scripture: Luke 11:1-4

Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." Jesus told them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, uphold the holiness of your name. Bring in your kingdom. Give us the bread we need for today. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who has wronged us. And don't lead us into temptation.'"

Observation: What were Jesus' disciples feeling as they listened to Jesus praying? There must have been something about his prayers that were qualitatively different from the prayers they had heard previously. They didn't ask, "Teach us to lead." Rather, "Teach us to pray." What if we changed the way we pray? It could change everything!

Application: The first objective of prayer is praying about what to pray about. Prayer isn't about outlining our agenda to God; it's about getting into God's presence and getting God's agenda into us. If you don't know where to start, go to the Bible. Start reading, and God will start speaking. That's when you stop reading and start praying. Words and phrases will jump off the page and into your spirit.

Prayer: Speak, Lord, your servant is listening. Give me the determination to seek you each day for as long as it takes. With my heart and mind open, I wait so that I can put my hands and feet to work according to your will. Amen.

Growing Deeper: How do I spend my spare time?

Saturday, February 17

Scripture: Philippians 2:3-4

Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others.

Observation: It is healthy to be self-aware. However, being too aware of self can make us self-absorbed if we're not careful. Wesley wanted us to reflect on the question, "Am I self-conscious, self-pitying or self-justifying?" so that we confront our human penchant to be so concerned with "self" that we lose sight of the "others" in our lives. Do yourself a favor. Reflect carefully and act

swiftly on the core of what Wesley was getting at in today's question. Watch it change the way you see the world and also the way others see you.

Application: How often do you attempt something you will be "bad" at? If your answer is "rarely," why do you think that is? Are you afraid of being embarrassed or looking foolish to others? Are you worried about criticism, or is it because you have an excessive need to always be the "best"? Has anyone ever told you that you are self-absorbed, self-pitying, or self-justifying? What were the circumstances of that encounter? What, if anything, did you learn about yourself as a result?

Prayer: God, teach me to serve you first and to seek your kingdom. Help me to be less concerned about myself and more about you and your mission for this world. Help me not to be so concerned with myself that I forget your purpose for me. Amen.

Growing Deeper: Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?