

The Excellency of Christ

by Jonathan Edwards

Edited & Updated for 21st Century Christians

[Revelation 5:5] And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” 6 And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. (ESV).

Edwards begins by stating: “There is an admirable conjunction or meeting of diverse and paradoxical elements in the Person of Jesus Christ.”

Jesus is called a “Lion”. “Behold the Lion of the Tribe of Judah”. Jesus is also called “Lamb”. “...I saw a Lamb”. John saw a Lamb who had prevailed to open the book. The book was John’s vision, or visual portrait of God’s decrees where the events in time and space were foreordained from the foundation of the world. The Lamb was “as if it had been slain”.

A lion is a devourer, one that is able and desires to make a terrible slaughters of others. No creature falls more easily prey to a lion than a lamb...The lion excels in strength, and in the majesty of his appearance and voice. The lamb excels in meekness and patience, besides the excellent nature of the creature as good for food, and yielding that which is fit for our clothing, and being suitable to be offered in sacrifice to God. But in Jesus Christ, we see both:

Because the diverse excellencies of both the lion and lamb wonderfully meet in him!

Such are the various divine perfections and excellencies that Christ is possessed of. Christ is a divine person and therefore has all the attributes of God. There do meet in Jesus Christ infinite highness and infinite condescension. Christ, as he is God, is infinitely great and high above all. He is higher than the kings of the earth for He is King of kings, and Lord of lords. He is higher than the heavens, and higher than all the highest angels of heaven.

So great is Christ, that all men, kings and princes, are as worms of the dust before him...He is so high, that he is infinitely above any need of us. He is above our reach, that we cannot profitable to him, and above our conceptions that we cannot fully comprehend him. Christ is the Creator and great Possessor (owner) of heaven and earth. He is sovereign Lord of all. His knowledge and wisdom is without bounds. His power is infinite, and none can resist him. His riches are immense and inexhaustible. His majesty is infinitely terrible (awesome or awful).

And yet Jesus is one of infinite condescension.

None are so low or inferior, but Christ’s condescension is sufficient to take a careful notice of them. He condescends graciously not only to the angels, humbling himself to behold the things that are done in heaven, but he also condescends to such poor creatures as sinful men- -even to those who are of the lowest rank and degree, such as those commonly

despised by their fellow creatures- - yet Christ does not despise them (1 Cor. 1:28).

Christ condescends to take notice of beggars (Luke 16:22) and people of the most despised nations of men (Col. 3:11). He that is thus high, condescends to take a gracious notice of little children (Matt. 14:14). What is even more significant, is that Christ takes a gracious notice of the most unworthy, sinful creatures, those that have no right to ask anything of God, and those that have infinitely offended God's holiness and character by living sinfully and selfishly, a law unto themselves.

And yet so great is Jesus' condescension.

What a meeting of infinite highness and low condescension do we see in the Person of Jesus Christ! We see in many of our experiences what a tendency that a high position or station with men will make them quite the contrary in their disposition.

If one worm be a little exalted above another, by having more dust, or a bigger dunghill, how much does he make of himself! What a distance does he keep from those that are below him! And a little condescension is what he expects of other men below him and for his position to be acknowledged as important and powerful!

Yet Christ condescends to wash our feet, even the feet of sinners who think so highly of themselves!

In Christ we also see infinite justice and infinite grace come together paradoxically and meet in his person.

As Christ is a divine person, he is infinitely holy and just, hating sin, and disposed to execute deserved punishment for it upon sinners. He is the Judge of the world, and the infinitely just Judge of it, and will not at all acquit the wicked, or by any means clear the guilty.

And yet Christ is infinitely gracious and merciful.

Though his justice be so strict with respect to sin, and every breach of God's Law, yet he has grace sufficient for every sinner, and even the chief of sinners. There is no benefit or blessing that sinners can receive that is greater than the sufficient grace of Christ, that can be received by even the greatest of sinners!

Christ not only bestowed grace for those sinners who will receive it by faith, but he suffered in this world of sin and misery in order to mercy to sinners. He suffered the most extreme evil unto death, receiving in himself the curse and punishment of God for sinners, although he was blameless and without sin. Christ had sufferings in his soul, that were the most immediate fruits of the wrath of God against the sins of those whom he loves and stands in for as the merciful Savior.

In the Person of Christ we see infinite glory and lowest humility come together paradoxically and meet in his person.

Infinite glory, and the virtue of humility meet in no other person but Christ. Infinite glory and lowest humility meet in no created person, for no created person has infinite glory, and they meet in no other divine person but Christ....In Jesus Christ, who is both God and

man, those two diverse excellencies are sweetly united. Christ is a person infinitely exalted in glory and dignity (Phil. 2:6ff).

But however he is thus above all in glory, yet he is lowest of all in humility.

There never was so great an instance of this virtue among either men or angels. None were ever so sensible and aware of the distance between God and him, or had a heart so lowly before God, as the man Christ Jesus (Matt. 11:29). What a wonderful spirit of humility appeared in him, when he was here upon earth, in all his life! In his contentment in his humble outward condition, contentedly living in the family of Joseph the carpenter, and Mary his mother, for thirty years together, and afterwards choosing outward poverty, contempt, rather than earthly greatness. He was content to wash dirty disciples' feet, in all of his speeches being a humble yet content man, and his cheerfully sustaining the form of a slave through his whole life, and submitting to such immense humiliation in death.

In the Person of Christ we see infinite majesty and transcendent meekness come together paradoxically and meet in his person.

These again are two qualifications and qualities that meet together in no other person but Christ. Meekness is a virtue proper only to the creature. We scarcely ever find meekness mentioned as a divine attribute in Scripture, at least not in the New Testament. But Christ being both God and man, has both infinite majesty and superlative meekness.

Christ was a person of infinite majesty. It is he that is mighty, that rides on the heavens, and his excellency on the sky. It is he that is terrible out of his holy places, who is mightier than the noise of many waters, even the great waters of the sea. Before him a fire goes, and burns up his enemies around him, at whose presence the earth quakes, and the hills melt. He is the One who sits on the circle of the earth, and all the inhabitants of the earth are as grasshoppers...He is the One who inhabits eternity, whose Kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and of whose dominion shall never end! (Psalm 45).

And yet Christ was the most marvelous instance of meekness, and humble quietness of spirit who ever lived!

He says about himself that he is meek and lowly in heart (Matt. 11:29). There was never such an exemplary life of meekness and humility than Jesus. Under injuries, persecutions, jeers, and sinful slander, Jesus did not revile! Jesus had a wonderful spirit of forgiveness, ready to forgive his worst enemies, and prayed for them with fervent and effectual prayers! With what meekness did he appear in the ring of soldiers that were condemning and mocking him - yet he was silent, and opened not his mouth, but went as a lamb to the slaughter.

Jesus Christ is a lion in majesty and a lamb in meekness.

In the Person of Christ we see the deepest reverence towards God and yet equality with God.

Christ, when on earth, appeared full of holy reverence towards the Father. He paid the most reverential worship to him, praying to him with postures of reverence such as kneeling before him and others. God the Father has no attribute or perfection that the Son has not, in equal degree, and equal glory, yet Christ was reverent before His Father.

In the Person of Christ we see an exceeding spirit of obedience with supreme dominion over heaven and earth.

Christ is the Lord of all things in two respects: (1) As God-man and Mediator between God and man, and thus his dominion is appointed, or given to him by His Father. He has his dominion in one respect as by delegation of God; He is His Father's vicegerent. (2) In another respect, he is Lord of all things because he is God, and so he is by natural right the Lord of all, and supreme over all as much as the Father. Thus, he has dominion over the world, not by delegation, but in his own right.

And yet is found in the same Jesus Christ, both God and man, the greatest spirit of obedience to the commands and laws of God that ever was in the universe which was manifest in his obedience here in this world (John 14:31). The greatness of his obedience appears in its perfection, and in his obeying commands of such exceeding difficulty.

Never has any one received commands from God of such difficulty! One of God's commands to Jesus was that he should yield himself to those dreadful sufferings on the cross which he underwent with full knowledge and willingness for us (John 10:18). As Philip-pians 2:8 says: "He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." As Hebrews 5:8 says: "Though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things he suffered."

In the Person of Christ we see absolute sovereignty and perfect resignation.

Christ, as he is God, is the absolute sovereign of the world, the sovereign disposer of every single event. The decrees of God are all his sovereign decrees, and the work of creation, and all of God's works of providence are his sovereign works.

Yet Christ was the greatest example of resignation that has ever appeared in this world. He was absolutely and perfectly resigned when he had a near and immediate prospect of his terrible sufferings, and the dreadful cup that he was to drink. The idea and expectation of this made his soul exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death, and put him into such agony, that his sweat was as it were great drops or clots of blood, falling down to the ground. Yet in these circumstances, he was fully resigned to the sovereign purposes of God and his will (Matt. 26:39): "O my Father, if this cup may not pass from me, except I drink it, thy will be done."

What an amazing act of grace was it when Christ took upon our human nature. In this act of great condescension, he who was God became man. The Word should be made flesh, and should take on him a nature infinitely below his original nature. We should appreciate the remarkably low circumstances of his incarnation: He was conceived in the womb of a poor young woman, whose poverty appeared in this, when she came to offer sacrifices for her purification, she brought what was allowed of in the Law only in the case of poverty, a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.

Christ's infinite condescension marvelously appeared in the manner of his birth. He was brought forth in a stable, because there was no room for them in the inn. The inn was taken up by others, that were looked upon as persons of greater account. The blessed Virgin, being poor and despised, was turned or shut out. Though she was in such need, yet those that counted themselves her better would not give place to them. Therefore, in her time of giving birth, she was forced to give birth to her son in a stable, and laid him in a feed trough.

There Christ lay a little infant, and there he eminently appeared as a lamb. But yet this feeble infant, born this way in a stable, and laid in a feed trough, was born to conquer and triumph over Satan, that roaring lion (cf. 1 Peter 5:8). Jesus came to subdue the mighty powers of darkness, and make a show of them openly, and so to restore peace on earth, and to manifest God's good-will towards men, and to bring glory to God in the highest!

In Jesus Christ's life, and especially in his suffering and death, he appears as paradoxically both lion and lamb.

He appeared as a lamb in the hands of his cruel enemies, as a lamb in the paws and between the devouring jaws of a roaring lion. He was a lamb actually slain by this lion, and yet at the same time, as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, he conquers and triumphs over Satan, destroying his own devourer! In Christ's death on the cross, we see the glorious strength of the lion destroying his enemies, as he was brought as a lamb to the slaughter.

In Christ's greatest weakness he was the strongest!

Even in Christ's present state of exaltation in heaven, we see the attributes of both the lion and the lamb! In his exalted state, he most eminently appears in manifestation of those excellencies and strength of a great lion, but he still appears as a lamb. Though Christ be now at the right hand of God, exalted as King of Heaven, and Lord of the universe, yet as he is still in the human nature, he still excels in humility!

Though the man Christ Jesus be now at the right hand of God, and is the highest of all creatures in heaven as a glorified man, yet he still excels all in humility because he still knows the infinite distance between the Creator and the creature. Though he now appears in such glorious majesty and dominion in heaven, yet he appears as a lamb in his condescending, mild, and sweet treatment of His saints here on earth. For he is a lamb still, even amidst the throne of his exaltation, and he that is Shepherd of the whole flock is himself a Lamb, and goes before them in heaven as such!

Though in heaven every knee bows to him, and though the angels fall down before him adoring him, yet he treats his saints with infinite condescension, love, mildness, patience, and endearment. And in his acts towards the saints on earth, Jesus still appears as a lamb, manifesting exceeding love and tenderness in his intercession for them, as one that has had experience of affliction and temptation like them.

Behold the Lamb who instructs, supplies grace, and comfort, coming to His own, and manifesting himself to them by His Spirit, supping with them at His table, and enabling them to do that which pleases God. Behold the Lamb admitting His people to sweet communion with Him, enabling them with boldness and confidence to come to him, and quieting their hearts with his peace.

Jesus Christ will come again and will appear as the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He will appear in infinite greatness and majesty, when he shall come again in glory, with all his holy angels, and the earth shall tremble before him, and the hills shall melt (Rev. 19:11-17; 20:11). The devils tremble at the thought of his appearance, and when the time comes, the kings, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, shall hide themselves in the dens, and in the rocks of mountains, and shall cry to the mountains and rocks to fall on them, to hide them from the face and wrath of the Lamb!

Jesus Christ will at the same time appear as a Lamb to his saints. He will receive them as friends and brethren, treating those who believe and have awaited his return with infinite mildness and love. The church shall be then admitted to him as his bride and that shall be their wedding day. The saints shall all be sweetly invited to come with him to inherit the kingdom, and reign with him in it for all eternity.

Jesus Christ the Lamb of God invites his people to come unto him and trust in him. With what sweet grace and kindness does he invite us to sup and fellowship with him by His Spirit. Jesus Christ the Lion of Judah invites his people to come to him in his glorious power and dominion for defense and shelter amidst the storms and struggles of this life.

Would you choose for a friend a person like Christ with such dignity? It is a thing common to our experience in this world to have those for our friends who are much above us because we look upon ourselves honored by the friendship of such. Thus, how a young inferior maid would be pleased to have a great and excellent prince to give his dear love to her?! This is the stuff of fairy tales! But Christ is infinitely above you, and above all the princes of the earth for he is King of kings. So honorable a person as this offers himself to you, in the nearest and dearest friendship!

Christ will himself give himself to you by faith, with all those various excellencies that paradoxically meet together in him, to your full and everlasting enjoyment. He will forever after treat you as his dear friend, and you shall always be where he is, and shall behold his glory, and dwell with him, in most free and intimate communion and enjoyment (1 John 3:1-3; Rev. 21:1-7).

- Jonathan Edwards, 'The Excellency of Christ'