

Romans 5:1-11  
March 8, 2026  
Third Sunday in Lent

In the iconic comic strip “Calvin and Hobbes,” Calvin is handed a snow shovel and shunted out the door with the observation that he is building character. In response, Calvin quips, “Pretty convenient the way every time I build character, Dad saves a few bucks.”

If it seems old-fashioned to think about building character, perhaps it is because the institutions most known for character-building in society, namely the church and the academy, have fallen silent on the subject.

In *When Jesus Came to Harvard*, Harvey Cox, a Harvard professor, remembers how the college noted that a disproportionate number of its alumni were being featured in the papers for financial scandals. To be sure, Harvard is a fine school. Its alumni tend to be successful. Yet success apparently was affording its graduates greater opportunities for moral failure. Acutely aware that their alumni were being indicted at a rapid clip, the faculty began to question the adequacy of their undergraduate curriculum: were they simply failing to teach such things as ethics and character? And if so, what should be done about it?

According to Cox, the institution’s answer, in part, was to throw Jesus at the problem. He began teaching a moral reasoning course that focused on the person of Jesus Christ. To his utter astonishment, the class became a runaway success.

Cox writes of the experience, “These students, like increasing numbers of people in the modern world, sense – however vaguely – that there was something fundamentally inadequate about moral relativism. They were sickened by the devastation some technologies have wreaked on nature. They winced at the posturing of politicians and the deceptions of the media. They recognized that advertising is saturated with calculated sham... but when it came to sorting through real ethical choices in conversation with other people, they seemed awkward and stifled.”

I wonder if the members of our congregations feel similarly ill-equipped to understand the ethical choices they face in their day-to-day lives.

No doubt, the church needs to be preaching and teaching about character. Yet we must do so with character! We are called to preach and teach with humility in a diverse world, resisting the pull toward judgment rather than grace.

By the way we live, we show how our Christian faith shapes our choices. In baptism, pastors and congregations alike promise to help nurture the moral and ethical lives of both children and adults.

Because we are the church and not the academy, we base our standard of Christian character on the person of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul has some very clear words to speak about character. In Romans 5:3-5, he writes, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts.”

Let’s pause for a second on suffering. Humans generally bear more responsibility for our own suffering than we might care to admit. God does not start wars, and God does not build bombs. When we, through the activities of trade, build cities in vulnerable places or contribute to climate change, which yields bigger and fiercer storms, suffering follows. We are horrified by mass shootings, but God did not build the guns or stop gun control, and suffering follows.

What God does do is this: God gives us a way to get through suffering.

Throughout our lives, whether we are suffering or joyful, we are accompanied by Christ, who assumed our suffering on the cross. In this accompaniment, God’s redemptive power transforms suffering. Karl Barth wrote in *The Epistle to the Romans*, “Our suffering is no longer a passive, dangerous, poisonous, destructive tribulation and perplexity such as invade the souls of those who hate the judge, but is transformed into a tribulation and perplexity which are creative, fruitful, powerful, promising, by which [humans] are dissolved, cast to the ground, pressed into a corner – and imprisoned – by God” (Emphasis mine).

Barth is saying that as we are being held by God, redemption is happening.

We need to teach our children about good character. We need to be on guard within ourselves against the unfair advantage, the cheap win, instead, leaning into endurance, so with God's support, God's redemption, our Christian character is being formed. We also know what happens to our common life when people of bad character control the levers of power, requiring people of good character to resist.

Maybe character boils down to just having standards of behavior. Or perhaps we might prefer to call it spiritual maturation.

Whatever it is, Paul says it leads to hope, and God knows we need more hope in this world.

Questions for reflection on John 3:1–17

1. What is an experience that led you to greater spiritual maturity? How does remembering that experience help you navigate ethical questions?
2. Who modeled Christian character for you in your formation?
3. How can you model Christian character for others?