

Meekness or Weakness?

SERIES: THE LIFE GOD BLESSES

I'm coaching Little League baseball this year and recently we held our draft. The draft is when coaches gather to select their team from a pool of players who have already been rated according to how they performed in tryouts. Draft night can be pretty tense. Each coach wants to put together the best team possible. Towards the end of the draft, an issue arose between me and another coach over who would end up with one of the weaker players, who had to be picked because he was 12 years old, and all 12 year olds had to be picked. Finally, I just took him, even though I didn't have to. Some of the other coaches felt like I was getting a raw deal and tried to talk me out of it, but it really wasn't that big of a deal to me, so I stuck with my decision. On the way out to my car that same night, I could tell one of the coaches felt sorry for me, and said, "I tried to stand up for you, but you just let them run over you." I could tell that he actually was upset with me. Basically his attitude was, "You can't be that way and succeed in the business of coaching. You'll lose; they'll chew you up and spit you out."

In the third Beatitude, Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." What that coach was saying to me that night was, "You can't be meek in this world. The meek won't inherit the earth; the meek will get run into the ground." This is what the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche believed. He said that when we look at the advice of Jesus in the Beatitudes, we're listening to the most seductive lie history has ever heard. When Nietzsche came to "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," he rephrased it, "Assert yourself. It is the arrogant who take over the earth."

We may call ourselves followers of Jesus, but few of us are really up to defending the idea that the meek will inherit the earth. Deep down we tend to disagree with this statement on both ends. On one end, we're not that attracted to the idea of meekness. Few of us would dare put it on our resumé when hunting for a high-powered job! Even the dictionary makes this word a negative. One dictionary defines meekness as "deficient in courage." Mine says among other things, "Overly submissive; spiritless." When we think of meekness, we think of a cross between a wimp and a wallflower. Charlie Brown might have been meek, but he didn't win many baseball games.

On the other end, we're not convinced they will inherit the earth. It could be that the meek will get to

heaven, but we know who gets the earth! The aggressive, the assertive, the Microsofts, the military dictators; these are the ones who own the earth. As Leo Durocher said, "Nice guys finish last." Tell an Israeli or a Palestinian fighting for land on the West Bank that the meek will inherit the earth, and they will look at you like you're nuts. The Jews of Jesus' day would have felt no different. Their land was occupied by the Romans. They expected a Messiah who would deliver them not by meekness, but by might.

And so when we come to this third Beatitude, we're not really sure it's true. Part of our problem is we don't really understand what Jesus meant by meekness. What did Jesus mean when he said, "Blessed are the meek"?

I. What is meekness?

The basic meaning of the word Jesus uses here is not to be deficient in courage, but it's to be gentle, humble, and considerate. The Greeks used this word in a positive sense. They used it to describe things that were gentle, like a gentle breeze that cools and soothes as opposed to a hurricane that kills. Or like a soft and gentle voice that calms. Good friends were described as meek because they were gracious and considerate. Aristotle used it to describe the balance between the two extremes of total rage and total numbness. A meek person was seen to be controlled and balanced. He got angry at the right things and he expressed it in the right way.

A most interesting use of this word came from an ancient letter. A young soldier in the Peloponnesian Wars wrote to his fiancé about a gift he had for her. It was a beautiful white stallion. He described it as the "most magnificent animal I have ever seen." He wrote to her, "He responds obediently to the slightest command. He allows his master to direct him to his full potential." And then he says, "He is the meekest of all horses." He wasn't saying that the horse was shy or slow or spiritless. He was an animal of great strength and spirit, but he was submissive to the rider. Even today, when a trainer says a racehorse is "the meekest on the track," he is paying that horse a great compliment. The idea behind the word meek is strength under control; power that is tamed and submissive to someone greater than ourselves.

The Old Testament confirms this. Take Moses for example. Here was a guy raised as Pharaoh's son. Here was a guy who later stood before Pharaoh and started a revolution. Here was a guy who led two-and-one-half million rebellious Jews through the wilderness for forty years. Here was a guy who missed out on the Promised Land because he got so mad he smashed the rock God told him to just touch. Yet, in Numbers 12:3, Moses is described as **“very meek, more than any man on the face of the earth.”** Moses was meek because, at his best, his great strength was under control and in submission to God.

The New Testament confirms this idea as well. Right here in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus invites those who are weary to come to him and find rest because he is **“meek and humble in heart”** (Mt. 11:29). The idea is that Jesus is approachable. When we come to him with a load on our back he won't pile more on; he won't scold you for not being able to carry your weight; he will give you rest. Jesus was as strong as they come, but he was gentle and approachable. He was a King who conquered through his meekness. When he rode into Jerusalem for the last time, he was described as **“meek, riding on a donkey”** (Mt 21:5). We would have expected him on a great horse; that's how conquering generals rode into town, but he comes humble, meek, riding on low class transportation. This is like the President riding in a Pinto! A few days later he is about to be arrested. Judas, his betrayer, leads a battalion of armed soldiers through the night. He greets Jesus with a hypocritical kiss. If I were Jesus I would blow this guy away. Yet in his meekness, Jesus said, “Friend, do what you have come for.” The following afternoon, as he hung naked on the cross, we're told that **“when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats”** (1 Peter 2:23). That's meekness. That's strength under control.

We can understand meekness better if we see it in relation to the first two Beatitudes. The first two deal with how we see ourselves before God. To be poor in spirit is to see our spiritual poverty and turn to God for mercy. To mourn is to grieve over what is wrong in us. This tells me that meekness begins with having a correct estimate of ourselves before God; to see myself as one in desperate need of God's grace and forgiveness. Those who think they are the center of the universe are not meek; they're arrogant and aggressive; they don't handle criticism well. People are there to meet their needs, and when they don't, heads roll. But when I see myself as a sinner in need of God's grace, that changes how I relate to others. Meekness is my relational response to how I see myself before God.

So meekness is not weakness, it's not being wishy washy or indecisive, it's not having an easy going

personality, it's not being shy or timid, it's not even being nice. Meekness is strength under control. It's a humble and gentle attitude toward others which is determined by a true estimate of ourselves before God. In his book, “The Pursuit of God,” A.W. Tozer writes,

“The meek man is not a mouse afflicted with a sense of his own inferiority. Rather, he may be in his moral life as bold as a lion and as strong as Samson; but he has stopped being fooled about himself. He has accepted God's estimate of his own life. He knows he is as weak and helpless as God has declared him to be, but paradoxically, he knows at the same time that he is, in the sight of God, more important than angels. In himself, nothing. In God, everything. That is his motto.”

We might agree with that. We might be able to see that meekness is something we could admire in a person. We might even decide we could be more meek ourselves. But we still wonder, what really happens to those kinds of people? Do things really turn out that well for them?

II. What will happen to the meek?

Jesus says, “the meek will inherit the earth.” When I read this I couldn't help but think of all the noise in the news lately about inheritance taxes! Maybe the meek may inherit the earth just in time to see it sold for taxes. But this phrase, “the meek will inherit the earth,” comes from Psalm 37. The idea of inheritance is repeated several times in this Psalm. Look at v. 7-9,

“Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him; fret not yourself because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes. Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; fret not yourself, it leads only to evildoing. For evildoers will be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord, they will inherit the land.”

Look at v. 11,

“But the humble will inherit the land, and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.”

Look at v. 34,

“Wait for the Lord, and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you will see it.”

The promise here has to do with inheriting the land of Israel. God had promised this land to his people. Notice how they will get it, by waiting on God. It's the meek; the humble, those who cease from anger and forsake wrath who will inherit the land. It's not those who grab for it and fight for it in their own strength.

Jesus takes this same idea of inheriting the land and applies it to us. Remember how he taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Revelation talks about a “new heaven and a new

earth.” The Bible points forward to a day when Jesus Christ will set up his literal kingdom on earth. And who is it for? Who will inherit it? Not the proud. Not those who trust in their own strength. Not those who take matters into their own hands. It belongs to those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those who are meek and humble and gentle. The greedy grab and lose, while the gentle inherit and gain. It's funny, you don't really earn an inheritance, you just receive it as a gift when someone dies. In the same way, we don't earn it, we receive it based on our relationship with God; we don't fight for it; we trust in him; we wait for him.

When you really think about it, the arrogant and the proud often come out empty-handed, even here on earth. We saw this in our study of Daniel. Nations and kings come and go: Assyria, Babylonia, Greece, Rome all seemed invincible in their day, but if we judge them by a greater span of years we see they don't inherit the earth, they have nothing. It's true in the animal world as well. Lions and tigers ought to be in control; sheep and cattle ought to be scarce. The eagle is far more powerful than the mouse. But the lion, tiger and eagle are on the endangered species list. There are plenty of sheep and cattle and mice! The proud and the powerful don't inherit the earth. They don't even win in personal relationships over the long run. How many of you enjoy friends that are rude and power hungry? People like that usually die lonely.

When you really think about it, it's the meek, the gentle, the humble who are most able to enjoy the earth even now. I look at people on the freeway who drive 90 miles an hour dodging in and out of lanes to get ahead. I look at people at an airline counter fighting for an upgrade. I look at people at a shopping center (or a church) fighting for a parking space like their life depended on it. What do these people have in common? Ulcers! They're miserable! It's the gentle, the gracious, the meek who seem to be enjoying life! In 2 Cor. 6:10 Paul describes the follower of Christ as **“having nothing yet possessing all things.”** The meek have Christ; they have everything; they are content. Not only will they inherit the earth in the future, they enjoy the earth now!

The meek WILL inherit the earth. So how do we become meek people? It doesn't come naturally to any of us. At heart, even the most shy and unassuming personality is not meek. So what can we do?

III. How can we become meek?

First of all, take a hard look at yourself. Do some inventory of your life. How meek are you? Answer these questions:

How unselfish are you? When was the last time

you gladly gave up the parking space? Remember Abraham? God promised to make his descendants into a great nation with their own land. The next thing you know his herdsman and his nephew Lot's herdsman are battling over the land. If I were Abraham, I'd say, “Listen buddy. First of all, I'm the uncle and you're the nephew! Second, God made the promise to me not to you.” But what did Abraham do? Let me read it: **“So Abram said to Lot, ‘Let's not have any quarreling between you and me...for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right. If you go to the right, I'll go to the left’**” (Gen. 13:8-9). In other words, “You take whatever you want and I'll take what's left.” When did you last do that without acting like a martyr?

Here's another question: How do you handle criticism? Are you defensive? Most of us would agree that God knows us inside and out. We might even be willing to admit to God that we are sinners. But if someone else comes along and agrees with our assessment, we bristle! In some ways, it's easier to be poor in spirit than it is to be meek. Recently I got my grade on my doctoral work in preaching for this year. I got a “B.” I was a little surprised because last year I got an “A.” Actually, I was more than a little surprised, I was ticked! I even wrote to one of my classmates and said, “What's this all about?!” Now I would never be so conceited to tell you that I'm an “A” preacher. I'm too modest for that. But as soon as someone else agrees with me, I'm hacked! I may be modest, but I'm not humble. Once again, let me quote from A.W. Tozer,

The heart's fierce effort to protect itself from every slight, to shield its touchy honor from the bad opinion of friend and enemy, will never let the mind have rest. Continue this fight through the years and the burden will become intolerable. Yet the sons of earth are carrying this burden continually, challenging every word spoken against them, cringing under every criticism, smarting under each fancied slight, tossing sleepless if another is preferred before them.

Such a burden as this is not necessary to bear. Jesus calls us to His rest, and meekness is His method. The meek man cares not at all who is greater than he, for he has long ago decided that the esteem of the world is not worth the effort. He develops toward himself a kindly sense of humor and learns to say, “Oh, so you have been overlooked? They have placed someone else before you? They have whispered that you are pretty small stuff after all? And now you feel hurt because the world is saying about you the very things you have been saying about yourself? Only yesterday you were telling God that you were nothing, a mere worm of the dust. Where is your consistency? Come on, humble yourself, and cease to care what men think.”

One more question: How approachable are you? Remember what I said about Jesus? Gentle, meek, humble people are approachable. By the way, the only way to find out if you're approachable is by asking those who know you. Of course, all of us think we are approachable, but that's not up to us to decide. It was said of Jesus, "A bruised reed he will not crush." How about you? Do bruised reeds find it easy to come to you, or are they afraid they will be crushed?

We have to take a hard look at ourselves. Most of us are going to come up short when we do this. What do you then?

Second, deal with your wrong assumptions. Maybe you aren't meek because you're reacting to a wrong view of meekness. Meekness is not weakness; it's strength under control. You can be a strong parent, or boss, or person in authority and still be meek. Maybe you aren't meek because you really don't trust God. You really believe that if you're going to come out ahead, you have fight for it. Perhaps you tried the meekness thing and got run over. This even applies to our efforts to serve Christ and advance his cause. What do we trust in? Buildings? Programs? Gifted leaders? We can be so zealous for advancing the cause of Christ that we do it in the flesh. We condemn, we criticize, we lose our temper, we nag, and it backfires. We really don't believe God's work can get done in God's way. But meekness, born out of a spirit of trust in God rather than ourselves, is a powerful weapon in the hands of God.

Finally, when it comes right down to it, we have to rely on the Holy Spirit to make us meek. The work of the Spirit in our life is to make us more like Christ. The flesh will never produce real gentleness. You could go out today and try really hard to be a meek person, but unless the Holy Spirit is empowering you, you'll be back to your old ways by dinnertime! And so, I would encourage you to ask the Lord, beg the Lord, to make you a person of meekness and gentleness and humility.

Have you ever seen a child open a gift on Christmas morning? Maybe you were so excited to give it to him, you couldn't wait to see the look on his face. And sure enough when he saw it he was thrilled. And of course he wanted to play with it, so he took it out of the box only to find out it needed batteries but they weren't included. He looked at you with a hopeful look on his face but you didn't have them either. What a bummer! You have this great gift but you can't use it!

God has given you this wonderful gift of meekness that can have a huge impact on every aspect of your life, but he has also given you the battery to use it. The Holy Spirit is Christ himself, the meekest and gentlest and most humble person, living in you, empowering you to be just like him.

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