

Blessed Are the Meek

Matthew 5:5

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We continue with our series on the Sermon on the Mount. Looking at the next beatitude from Matthew 5: Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. While this beatitude is similar to the first one on the poor in spirit, it does have a different focus, and the Lord clearly thought two separate beatitudes were in order. There is even, perhaps, a kind of progression: the poor in spirit mourn, and those who mourn their own sins, and the sins of the church and the world...such people lack the altitude, the high-horse, the self-assured certainty, to be anything but meek. So, we will look at this text under two headings: meekness and the inheritance.

I. Meekness

First, meekness. The meekness here has two dimensions. Internal and external, or meekness before God, and meekness before men.

Internal

Let's take internal meekness, meekness before God, first. Meekness, like all virtue, is something open and bare before the eyes of God. Something he sees and knows about – or doesn't see and knows its absence – apart from what others think of us. These beatitudes, then, cannot be faked. And God cannot be fooled, nor will he, in his goodness, accept any substitutes, or any stunted distortions. One will need to be broken, shattered, slain, overthrown and remolded to acquire this flourishing blessedness. Of this we can be certain. And if we won't have this vertigo in our spiritual lives, we will not have spiritual transformation.

Meekness, then, is rooted in the deep interior reservoir of human life. And if one doesn't take a good hard, long critical look down there, down into the unconquered territory of the soul, one will not make any progress in bringing forth this (or any other) fruit of the Spirit. Ruthlessness with oneself before God, then, is necessary to advance in the school of meekness. A school where we cut our way forward – against the grain of our natures - only with strenuous effort. In the tumult of the raging, roiling, emotional and thought life of a person. There, meekness must conquer. Mildness must tame the wild horses of human passion.

And the great Bible translator, John Wycliff, translated this verse: Blessed are mild men. (sentiment completely absent to my ears)

So what are we talking about when we speak of meekness? The word means, essentially: gentle or humble. The meek are calm and quiet, their soul is composed, childlike, before God. They are, in their own minds, small before God. Now, this does not mean that they are engaging in false humility or unnecessary self-abasement. They are living in reality. They have a true and sober view of themselves before the face of God. In this we are imitators of the Master who said: Learn of me for I am meek and lowly of heart. (learned Christ?)

External

But this internal meekness, if it is real, manifests itself in External meekness – or meekness as it relates to others. The meek one is dispossessed of self, and self-assertion, and wholly possessed by God – and thus meek or gentle toward men.

The NEB translates our text as: blessed are the gentle in spirit. The meek are civil, they are courteous, soothing, they are not needlessly aggressive or argumentative. They refuse to throw their weight around, to seek leverage. They've given up grasping, rage, and self-assertion, and defensiveness. They are done with pride, and boasting, and vain-glory. Their intemperance has been tamed. It is their joy to show deference to others. To place the needs of others above their own. They have had the harshness of their personality hammered out of them, by the grace of God. Like the Master, they have a deep tenderness toward others.

Now, in this context, and throughout Israel and the church's history, the meek have tended to be poor, oppressed, they would often be those who are suffering. Yet, they maintain a calm, quiet trust. They don't fret. They don't plot their revenge. They know how to be still. To wait for the Lord. They are non-aggressors. They are not easily provoked. Indeed, they are, like Jesus, submissive under provocation. They would consider it absurd that they fight fire with fire, or that they take vengeance into their own hands. Like their Lord, they would rather endure evil, than strike back. For when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

The meek seek to imitate his non-retaliatory, non-vindictive ethic of suffering love. A meekness so alien to us, it pleads for his murderers: Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. Yet, meekness is NOT weakness, it is not spinelessness or pure passivity. It is not to be equated with a natural shyness or lack of aggression.

The ancient Greco-Roman (modern American) world did not care much for meekness as a virtue. They saw it as servility, as the mindset of slaves. They

preferred heroic men of valor and virtue. The generals and statesmen who, from their point of view, really did control and inherit the earth. The 19th c atheist, Friedrich Nietzsche, forcefully expressed the same contempt, as he glamorized the forceful, assertive courageous men of antiquity. But this is a massive misunderstanding of the virtue our Lord here pronounces his blessing on. This meekness is the very opposite of weakness. It is fidelity to God under provocation, it is steadfast and active in faith, it is pure in devotion. It is the height of moral strength and dignity. It is a hard meekness which will go on to seek justice and righteousness.

Again, Jesus is the model here. As the prophet Isaiah promised, he did not quarrel or raise his voice in the streets, he did not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick – yet he did, and he shall, lead justice to victory. This meekness comes with a moral zeal for what is right, and in our Lord, it was not incompatible with making a whip and driving the moneychangers out of the temple. Moses, who I don't think anyone will accuse of being a wallflower, was called the meekest man on earth. David the warrior king, said, in Psalm 18, that it was the meekness of God which made him great.

Meekness is directly related to greatness in the kingdom. In giving this beatitude, Jesus is directly citing Psalm 37 – so this is not simply a NT ideal. And there we learn that the meek take refuge in God. They commit their way to him, they dwell in the land they are to inherit and cultivate faithfulness, they wait for the Lord with active hope... and knowing the End of both the righteous and the wicked, they, like the meek Jesus, are content to leave things in the hands of him who judges justly.

II. Inheritance

This brings us to our second point, the inheritance. All the beatitudes play on the paradox, the somewhat shocking contrast between the virtues Jesus pronounces as blessed (signs of flourishing) and the rewards he promises. But here the contrast is especially sharp. The *meek* shall *inherit the earth*. If anything, it seems that the opposite is the case. The powerful, the mighty, those who seek vengeance, and who take up force of arms, they are the one who control and dominate the earth.

As Calvin says: the sons of this generation believe that safety lies only in their sharp resistance to any wrong done to them, and thus they defend their lives with force of arms. Or maybe, less dramatically, we think it's the rich, the corporate CEO's, the big organizations, the people who wield the levers of political power – now they are inheriting the earth!

But Jesus means what he says, and there is no need to spiritualize away the force of the promise here. As for the current rulers of the nations, we do well to

remember Psalm 2. There God addresses their pretensions, and he laughs at their folly. He tells them that he has installed his king, the risen Son of David, on Mount Zion. And it is this Christ, the text says, who has and who will receive the nations as his inheritance. He will rule them with a rod of iron and dash them like a potter's vessel.

The kings are therefore warned to kiss the Son (to pay public homage to Him) lest they face his wrath. So let us not be dismayed by the political forces of this age, for Paul tells us that the rulers of this age are coming to nothing. The everlasting kingdom of the king of all kings has been inaugurated, and it continues unthreatened, and it shall be consummated in the age to come. Thus, in Christ, the meek One, the meek shall inherit the earth. This has two dimensions. One is the already, and one is the not yet. Or, put more simply, we taste our inheritance now, and we inherit fully, later.

Now

Let's look at both dimensions of our inheriting of the earth. First, the now, or the already. Jesus said if we seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness we have all we need. We dwell in the land and, even if our lot is small, we have it with God's blessing. We have the gift of the Spirit who is the foretaste, the earnest, the down payment of our inheritance, and thus we begin to enjoy our inheritance even now. The saints who are being martyred in the book of Revelation, are being sent into the glorious throne room of God and Lamb, where their prayers are directing history contrary to all appearances. They exercise more political sway than all the world's potentates. Though it looks as if they are impotent, dead, non-actors in the global drama.

Thus, Paul can say that having nothing, he yet possesses all things. In Christ, he tells us, all things – all things! – are already ours (faith and promise), whether the world, or life, or death, or the present or the future. All things are Christ's, and we belong to Him, and thus the meek are already being exalted to inherit the earth.

Not Yet

Second, though, this will be fully actualized, fully concrete and material – fully political if you will – when the not yet, the later, is realized at Christ's advent. Inherit is after all, an eschatological word – one gets a title to the inheritance now, and a foretaste, but one inherits at the end.

Here we need to go back to the original promise to Abraham. Along with a seed, he was promised an actual land inheritance – the land of Canaan. This is the land which was later conquered under Joshua and consolidated and largely subdued under David.

But like Joshua and David were types, foreshadowings, of Christ, so the land was always meant to function as a type of the renewed world that the seed of Abraham – Christ is the seed singular, and we are the seed plural – the land was always a type of the world the seed of Abraham was to inherit. We know this, for example, from Romans 4 where Paul says that Abraham is the heir of the world. Not just Palestine, but the earth. And Hebrews 11 tells us that, as he wandered in the Promised Land, Abraham was seeking the city of God, the city which is to come, the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.

Thus, from the very beginning, the land was a picture of the new heavens and the new earth, that Christ, the seed of Abraham, and those in him, were to possess. In fact, in Psalm 37, where Jesus actually takes the phrase about the meek inheriting the land, it is clear – even there – that the context is eschatological – that is, they will inherit it when God arises to judge, when all the wicked are uprooted and cut off forever.

Psalm 37 says: Fret not yourself because of the wicked, *for the meek shall possess the land*, wait for the Lord, and keep his way, and he will exalt you to possess the land, those blessed by the Lord shall possess the Land; you will look on the destruction of the wicked.

In a deep way, it is obvious, utterly necessary, that the accent here be future. The meek are God's poor ones – ALL of God's poor ones – the whole church, living and dead. And the church, rest assured, shall enter into its glorious inheritance TOGETHER, corporately, at the eschaton. We don't have a situation where some inherit now, and others inherit later. We have a situation where all believers get a FORESTASTE now, and the whole church shall enter its glory TOGETHER, later.

So Jesus is not talking about some purely spiritualized blessing here. He means what he says in the plainest sense. The meek will inherit the earth, the renewed cosmos depicted in Revelation chapters 21 and 22. That coming fullness is what the Spirit gives us a down payment of now. That inheritance is inalienable, we cannot be separated from it, for Jesus, the meek One, has been raised and installed as King. He has received his glorious inheritance, and that guarantees our future reception of the fullness of our inheritance.

This is why Peter says our inheritance is in heaven, it is kept for us by the power of God, it is undefiled, unfading, and imperishable. In short, it is, like the meek, safe and secure from all alarms. This, beloved, is not just some nice piece of theology. It is the heart of the Christian hope. And believing it, really believing this unbelievable future, is what enables us to lay down our pride, our weapons, our fretting about our current state of affairs, our need for self-assertion and vengeance.

If we must have glory and power NOW, and are not content (w/ the foretaste) to wait on the promise, it is unlikely we will be meek. But this hope, this eschatological hope, this certain future inheritance, this is the mother of meekness here and now. And, if we are to receive our inheritance, we must follow the way of the meek Lamb, we must walk in the strength, the dignity of his way – the way of non-violence, of non-retaliation, the mighty way of meekness, which is the way of the cross.

In this manner, in the midst of the wildness and rage of enemies, exposed and vulnerable, Calvin says, we live under God's protecting hand. And this, he says: is enough for the meek, until, at the last day, they reach the inheritance of the world. For the mystery of this beatitude is precisely this: self-renunciation is the way to world domination. The meek (and only the meek) SHALL – it is assured – they SHALL inherit the earth. Amen.

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