

Meek Ain't Weak

(Psalm 37) Matthew 5:5

Of all the Beatitudes, when we hear them, this one is likely the most misunderstood. We don't like the first part-- "*Blessed are the meek*"--and we don't get the second part at all-- "*they will inherit the earth.*" Yes, the earth?! Jesus is actually quoting Psalm 37:11, "*the meek shall inherit the land.*" The word "*land*" here may also be translated as "*earth*." In the psalm, it meant the land of Israel. The word "meek," while not a wrong translation, is better understood by us today as "humble" or "gentle." The meek or humble here are the equivalent to the "poor/poor in spirit" in Beatitude 1. To "inherit the land" or "earth" is to another way to speak of the realization of God's just kingdom in this world, part of the full reward for God's people to come with the Resurrection. And while this beatitude is a somewhat reworded version of beatitude 1, it brings out another side to the "blessed" in God's kingdom. So first, let's get that meekness is not weakness. Yet we need to see what that looks like. Let me give an example.

In 1947, Branch Rickey was the President and General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. He had decided that it was time to integrate MLB. He wanted to hire Jackie Robinson from one of the Negro teams, and had him come into his office. And then he got into his face: "*The Dodgers check in to a hotel. A decent good hotel. You're worn out from the road and some clerk won't give you the pen to sign in. 'We got not room, boy, not even down in the coal bin where you belong.'* The team stops at a restaurant. The waiter won't take your order. 'Didn't you see the sign on the door? No animals allowed.' What are you going to do then? Fight him? Ruin all my plans? Answer

me, you son of a bit--!" Jackie says, "Do you want a ballplayer who doesn't have the guts to fight back? Is that what you want?" Rickey answers: "I want one who has the guts not to fight back! There are people who will not like this. They will do anything to get you to react. If you echo a curse with a curse, they will only hear yours. Follow a blow with a blow and they will say a Negro lost his temper; that the Negro does not belong. Your enemy will be out in force, but you cannot meet him on his own low ground. We win with hitting, running, and fielding, nothing else. We win if the world is convinced of two things: that you are a fine gentlemen and a great ballplayer." And then Rickey said: *"Like our Savior, you must have the guts to turn the other cheek. Can you do it?"* Robinson replied, *"Mr. Rickey, you give me a uniform, you give me a number on my back, and I'll give you the guts."* Jackie was #42 for the Dodgers.

No, meekness is not weakness of any kind--whether physical, mental, or emotional. Gentleness or meekness is strength focused and under control, tamed even--like the strength of a fine horse, but tamed and controlled for a specific purpose. It's the very way that Jesus spoke of himself as *"meek and lowly of heart,"* (Mt 11:28). We see it some-times with the famous, though too often we don't! But the athlete, Hollywood actor, or politician at the top of their game, who speaks with a certain self-deprecating humor or is even reluctant to talk about themselves presents this somewhat. The meek are those who are humble, gentle, using their strength in a tamed manner. The medieval monk Bernard of Clairvaux said, *"Learn the lesson that, if you want to do the work of a prophet, what you need is not a scepter but a hoe."* That is, if you want to really speak to people, to minister to them--and not just with words-- you don't carry a scepter (force of others) but you carry a hoe (an instrument indicating

working alongside and with others humbly).

Jesus was the personification of meek, but he was not weak. His strength was focused and strategic. In his ministry, he was constantly challenging, calling out, warning and confronting the religious and social powers that were, but for the kingdom purpose, for salvation's goal--remaking human beings into the likeness of himself and reordering the whole world into God's kingdom life. Yet he intentionally pushed the edges of current respectability through his practice of open fellowship with any that sought him out. He touched, ate with, and healed all sorts of people on the Sabbath day (all strictly forbidden by their Bible). He constantly disregarded certain laws and expected rituals of holiness and cleanliness every good Jew was expected to observe. By his constant three-year challenge of these things, he was courting death; and it found him. That was meek, and it was not at all weak. The humility of Jesus was anything but timidity.

And even with his powerful, even charismatic personality and spiritual powers of healing and exorcism, he was empty of selfish ambition. His emphases were always about and showing forgiveness, reconciliation, nonviolence, and peace-making. His meekness was marked out by great courage, self-restraint, and an openness to others that took people's breath away, made them laugh, or angered them, and continually beckoned a social religious welcome toward others that was unknown before. So "meek ain't weak." And still meekness, humility, or gentleness are heard in Jesus' beckoning words, *"Come to me, all you that weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls,"* (Mt 11:28-29).

Now why did he do this? Jesus was showing us the way human beings were meant to be with each other. *Rolling Stone* magazine interviewed Scott Weiland of the band, *The Stone Temple Pilots*, after his release from prison for a drug charge. In the interview, he kept using the word humility. The reporter asked him to define the term. Weiland said, “It’s not thinking less of myself. It’s me thinking of myself less.” That’s right. Too many Christians, I observe, have been beaten down by the church, by family members sometime, or other teachers and so misunderstand the nature of true humility. Certainly we all flawed and broken. We exhibit a selfish bent and strong propensity to guard ourselves at the expense of others and use what power--much or little--in wrong ways. But nonetheless, that doesn’t mean we’re “no good” or “no account.” As Jesus speaks, meekness or humility is not self-abasement, self-contempt, or self-hatred.

God made human beings good, and despite much of what we do, there is both true value and good in every person. Every person is made in the image of God, no matter how flawed or sinful. The Gospel is that God believes we are each and every one worth his effort of redemption and renewal. This is why a fuller meaning of salvation is desperately needed among the church. Salvation is not primarily about saving us from some eternal hell. It’s much about saving us from the hells we create for ourselves and others here and now in this world. To quote Tony Campolo again, “*When we talk about Jesus, we make it clear that He is not just interested in our well-being in the after-life. He is a Savior who is at work today trying to save the world from what it is, and make it into a place where people can live together with dignity,*” (*Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 126).

Jesus has come to save us in the more important sense to transform us, to learn

how to really be human again, and how to live with other human beings as he intended. This is what Jesus shows us. He didn't just live just to go to the cross and die to save us. He lived to show us what saved lives look like--what it is to live out of grace human lives that are good, merciful, loving and just; in short, to image God (Eph 51-:2). Humility then is not thinking less of myself but thinking of myself less, so I can think more of others and serve others. It is being less absorbed, so I can be more other-oriented. It is being less preoccupied with my ego desires, so I seek first God's kingdom and its priorities. As Chuck Queen puts it, *"Meekness is not weakness, humility is not timidity, and Jesus' relinquishment of power is not powerlessness. In God's upside-down kingdom [--really it's right-side up--], the powerbrokers of this world find themselves last, and the meek will inherit the earth,"* (*Being a Progressive Christian for Dummies*, p. 94).

That being said, though, it needs to be underscored that what being a meek or humble person is about. It's not meekness or humility for its own sake. Live that way and you will get run over! No, meek living has a focus. It is surrendering oneself to the kingdom-will of God. Just as the *"poor in spirit"* are dependent and look to God for his just kingdom to come, so the *"meek"* are those who are dependent upon God for his deliverance, salvation, and justice upon the earth. And when it comes, they will be the joyful recipients of that reward, while the corrupt, proud, and powerful will be humbled and judged accordingly. Again, it's the picture in Psalm 37 (vss.4,6,8-9,11,14,29,37,39).

What we read there in the psalm, we see spoken and lived out in Jesus' life--and death--and it is this surrender to God's will. Our wills are meant to be tamed by the will of God demonstrated in Jesus. Over and over again in the gospels, we see Jesus in

contrast to his critics. And the picture we are presented is Jesus--surrendered to God's will as a human being in this world--versus others who see themselves as hardly dependent upon God for anything. If one is not really consciously dependent upon God, one has no reason to give thanks to God, or to others, and that results in great lacking in humility. Such a superior attitude then alienates him from all sorts of persons we may consider outcasts. How often do we find reason or opinion to disdain others and treat them with contempt. Disagreeing with someone over a matter is one thing. But to despise persons themselves and treat them with utter contempt is another. That is often the reason for strife and hatred--be it in the family, the public, those different from us for whatever social, political, or religious reasons we can muster. As Martin Luther King observed in his book, *Strength to Love* (p. 48), "*Jesus understood the difficulty inherent in the act of loving one's enemy...He realized that every genuine expression of love grows out of a consistent and total surrender to God.*"

So Jesus' beatitude then expands its ancient psalm setting to include the whole world: "*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*" For while the promise invokes God's justice for the oppressed and humble in the land of Israel, the Gospel takes this promise to the whole world, fulfilling the original universal promise of God's kingdom to Abraham (Gen 12:3), "*Through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,*" and the vision of Isaiah (11:9): "*For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.*"

In the world God made and is now remaking through Jesus, the whole world is in view as the place of God's dwelling, where God's righteousness and justice are realized for all who look to God and so surrender to his will as seen and lived out by Jesus Christ.

Too much of the Christianity we grew up with--and maybe still think with-- defines Christian faith as primarily just right beliefs and right morals. Yes, beliefs and morals have their place. But to follow Jesus, means--demands--much more. It means actively seeking and doing God's will for salvation--with the template of Jesus ever before us.

In the early part of the 20th century, there was a famous Chinese Christian minister and writer, Watchman Nee. Nee tells a story of a rice farmer in south China, who was a Christian, and had his rice field on a hill. He used a hand-operated water-wheel to lift water to his field from the irrigation stream that ran at the base of the hill. This man's neighbor had a field below his, and on one night, the other man dug a hole in the wall between their fields and drained out all the water out of the Christian man's field to fill up his own field. Of course, this bothered the Christian man, because it didn't just happen once, but kept happening. So he asked some of his fellow Christians, "*What should I do? I have tried to be patient and not retaliate. Isn't it right for me to confront him?*" Now, we might want to stop and think for a moment. What would you do? What do you think you might do? What, as a Christian, would be the right thing to do?

So, the Christian man and his church prayed about it, and one replied. "*If we only try to do the right thing, surely we are very poor Christians. We have to do something more than what is right.*" The farmer was challenged, and decided what he would do. The next morning, he went out and first pumped water for his stealing neighbor's field below his. Then, he pumped water for his own field. From that day on, the water he pumped for his own field stayed there. After some time, the other man made some inquiries, found out who the man was who he had been stealing water from. And sometime later, he became a Christian.

Not merely doing the right thing, but something more is what Jesus wants. This is a picture of meekness or gentleness. Clearly, it is not passive. It's active and with a focus--the kingdom will of God for the world. Anyone can do--and should do--the right thing, even if it's not easy. But, to act in behalf of the other--especially if the other is an enemy or unfriendly--that is the Christian calling. It's not doing something right, just because it's right. It's doing something more what is merely right for the sake of others. It is to actively try to create something better. In fact, as John Calvin says, "*it is to love.*" In God's kingdom, the "Jesus thing" is that which works to make things as they ought to be in the ultimate sense, in the way things will be when Christ's kingdom comes completely, when indeed, as Jesus says "*the meek will inherit the earth.*" So the meekness Jesus speaks of here is not a passive thing. But it is not content with the way things are.

It is active for the kingdom of God.

There was another thing that happened in that first year Jackie Robinson played MLB. Early in that season, both Branch Rickey and Robinson had received literally hundreds of hate mail and life-threatening letters. On their first road trip, they were in Cincinnati. As the Dodgers took the field, there were catcalls and racial slurs being yelled at Robinson. He just ignored them. He threw the ball over to his teammate Pee Wee Reese, a Southerner from Kentucky. Someone even yelled out, "*Pee Wee, how can you play with this black bast-rd?!*" Reese trotted over from short to Jackie at first and they exchanged a friendly word in view of the unpleasantness of the situation.

Then Pee Wee impulsively threw his arm around Jackie's shoulder, and looked up into the stands. The crowd went quiet, shocked at the gesture. Pee Wee said, "*Thank*

you, Jackie.” “What are you thanking me for?” said Jackie. Pee Wee said, “I’ve got family here from Louisville. Up there somewhere. I need ’em to know who I am.”

After a moment, the umpire yelled to Reese, “Hey! Number 1! You playing ball or socializing?” “Playing ball, ump! Playing ball!” And as he trotted back to short, Pee Wee yelled back to Jackie: “Maybe tomorrow we’ll all wear 42. That way they won’t be able tell us apart.” Imagine a world where no one could tell us all apart because we all act with the meekness of Jesus. Well, friends, Jesus is not asking us to imagine such a world. He is looking to us to make it so. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Amen.