



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Blessed are the Meek

St. Matthew 5:5

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As we've been looking at the first of the Beatitudes, I hope you've seen that these are all connected. As I said in the first sermon, Jesus isn't describing natural virtues here – he's describing his people – people who have been transformed by God's grace. And he's not describing these virtues as if one person is characterised by one and someone else by another, as if one person is poor in spirit and another is mournful. All eight of these characteristics should describe each follower of Christ.

Jesus began with those words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We enter the Kingdom by the recognising that we are nothing – that we can't save ourselves and that we have nothing good of our own to claim before God. The door is through the righteousness of Christ, not any supposed righteousness of our own. And poverty of spirit then leads us to mourn. Jesus tells us, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Again, he's not talking about a natural mourning over the bad things that happen in life – he's talking about our mourning our own badness, our own sin, our own unrighteousness, and the unrighteousness of the spiritually perishing people and world around us. The greatest comfort in the world is in God's pronouncement of absolution on the contrite sinner. As I said last week, poverty of spirit should move us to confess our sin, and our mournfulness leads us to the contrition that has to follow if our confession is to be meaningful. Mourning is the emotional counterpart of being poor in spirit.

These two naturally lead to meekness. Jesus tells us:

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:5)

All along we've seen just how counter cultural Jesus' message is. He was speaking to Jews when he first preached

this sermon and we've seen him countering all the popular ideas of the day. He's been telling the people that God's Kingdom isn't for the strong, it's for the weak; it's not for the rich, it's for the poor; it's not for the soldier to take with his sword, it's for the child who can't even defend himself. Jesus turns the world upside down, and now he tells us that it's the meek people who will inherit the earth.

By the world's thinking that's all wrong. Think about it. How does the world tell us to get the things we want? The world tells us that to get to the top you have to step on a few toes here and a few fingers there. To make it in the world you have to put yourself first. To get the things you want and to have the good life you have to put Number One first. In the business world the conventional wisdom says that you have to undercut everybody else. Try working around a sales environment for a while and you'll see just how cut-throat the world can be. Meekness isn't at the top of the list of qualities they promote at motivational seminars. The world is all about taking as much as you can and leaving everyone else in the dust.

The Jews of Jesus' day were no different than we are. His preaching was just as shocking to them, and probably even more shocking to those who came to hear the Messiah preach. They were sure that he had come with a sword, to raise a mighty army, and to throw out the Romans the way their ancestors had destroyed the Canaanites under Joshua's leadership and the way the Maccabees had overthrown the Greeks. And now the Messiah stands before them talking about the meek inheriting the earth.

God's Word stands in opposition to the conventional wisdom of the World. St. Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-28)

The world struggles along thinking it's everything, but God's people find they

have everything because they know that they are nothing.

Why don't we understand this? St. James tells us, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." (James 1:17). Note the emphasis on "good" and "perfect" -- those things don't come from us. We can't get them on our own, we can't make them, we can't produce them, in fact, man's whole problem since the Fall has been that we've put ourselves in the place of God, trying to determine what's good for us. The end result is that God's values have become foolishness to us. We've become so corrupt and contrary to God that we don't know which end is up anymore. St. James goes on later saying, "Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21). St. Peter urges us to meekly respond to the world: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense of everyone who asks you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15 NKJV). St. Paul lists this with the other fruit of the Spirit in Galatians: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23 RSV). For Paul, meekness was one of the key things that went into dealing with problems within the Church. He oversaw a lot of churches from a distance, even telling about the stress that it caused him to see all their problems, but never do we see him railing against them in angry rants, instead he wrote loving letters urging them to live by God's grace. We come to faith in Christ by meekly hearing and receiving his Word, but meekness should continue to characterise our lives forever after that.

The world has ungodly values, but it also doesn't help that the world gives us false understanding of what meekness is. I think the first image that comes to most people is the stereotypical sappy painting of Jesus that seems to hang in just about every Sunday school classroom. We think of the words of John Wesley's hymn, "gentle, Jesus meek and mild," and we put the worst possible spin on them. The world associates meekness with spiritlessness, with weakness, and with cowardice. But the fact is that John Wesley's words are right on the mark.

Jesus described himself saying, "I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29 RSV). Think of the Messiah that the prophet Zechariah described:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

Jesus was without doubt gentle, meek, and mild, but he wasn't spiritless, weak, or cowardly either. The world looks at a man who allowed himself to be crucified for a crime he didn't commit and calls it foolishness, calls it weak and cowardly, but the world calls it those thing because it doesn't understand, because the Gospel is foolishness to those without the renewing grace of God. The World doesn't understand a spiritual strength that allows itself to be sacrificed for another.

Take another example: When I say the name, Moses, what comes to mind? I'm guessing that no one here would think of Moses in connection with the same Wesley hymn I mentioned earlier: "gentle Moses, meek and mild." Thanks to Hollywood I immediately picture Charleton Heston in all his gritty toughness: taking on the mighty King of Egypt today, tomorrow he's the Omega Man, and on Tuesday he'll be ready to take on Dr. Zaius and an army of angry super-evolved gorillas! And so it's a little bit surprising that in Numbers 12:3 we read that "the man Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth." His most noticeable quality was meekness. And that should tell us something about what it means to be meek. First, it's not something that is natural to us. Acts 7 suggests that when Moses killed the Egyptian taskmaster, he was thinking that a great Israelites slave revolution would begin with him taking matters into his own hands. He had been raised as a prince, to think he was a big shot, and even after finding out he wasn't the great Egyptian prince he thought he was, he was still thinking like a big shot – like he could do it on his own. It took forty years in the wilderness tending sheep to teach him that God's the only real big shot and that without God's grace he, Moses, was a nobody. It took forty years of living a simple life that allowed him to reflect on and mourn his own sinfulness. I

think Moses teaches us, secondly, that the way the world defines meekness is wrong. If there's anyone we can think of in Scripture who was no cowardly weakling it was Moses.

If we understand what biblical meekness means, then we can see why Jesus puts it here between mourning and hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Meekness is truly a gentleness of spirit. It's a humble and gentle quality that we show to others, that itself is rooted in a true understanding and estimation of ourselves. It's the quality of character that comes not just from being willing to declare ourselves sinners, but to allow others to declare us sinners.

The Beatitudes get more difficult as we progress through them. Remember that this is the mountaintop that Jesus has told we have to reach, but it's also the mountaintop to which we can never climb. It's only God's grace that can carry us to the top. Knowing our own nothingness and being willing to confess it privately to God, or even confessing it as we do corporately each Sunday morning is one thing, but mourning those same sins is another. To mourn demonstrates that we really are sorry for our sins. But meekness goes beyond this. Meekness goes beyond calling ourselves sinners, and allows others to see us as sinners. We don't naturally like that. Think about it. For most Christians it's not that big of a deal anymore to acknowledge that we're fallen – that we're sinners in a general sense. But it's a lot more difficult to publicly acknowledge our specific sins. There's a reason why confessions are heard in private – while it's true that not everyone needs to know the private sins of everyone else, it's also true that we don't want others to know them. It's easy to say, "I'm a sinner." As Christians we may even, unfortunately, take pride in admitting as much – a false humility. But it's not so easy to tell our brothers and sisters specific sins – the things we struggle with in secret and that we'd rather keep secret. Our natural pride won't let us openly admit those things. Meekness is exactly the opposite – it allows us to humbly admit exactly what we are. To be meek is to have a realistic view of ourselves and that view is seen in how we treat others. Meekness drives us to be gentle, humble, sensitive, and patient with other people. A proud person who isn't

willing to admit his sin treats everyone else like dirt. But a person who knows he's sinner and stands before God only by grace, treats other people with that same grace that God has shown him.

But because meekness is rooted in our being able to see ourselves as God sees us, it isn't something that we can put on by willpower. You can't get up in the morning and choose that from today on you're going to be meek. You might be able to put on a good show for a few days, maybe even a few weeks, but if it's not who you really are, you won't live it for long.

If your character is meek, it's because you're finished with yourself. Your life isn't characterised by wanting to make sure your rights aren't infringed. This is hard for us, because everything about our modern western culture goes against this. We live in a world where everyone has rights. We know what's ours and we're ready to fight to the death for it! And while the meek person may fight for the rights of others, he never put up a fight for his own, because he knows that in Christ he has all he needs. Look at the example of Jesus again. St. Peter encourages meekness in us by showing us Jesus:

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 St. Peter 2:21b-24)

Meekness grows out of the grace of God, and having experienced that sustaining grace we can put our trust in him and leave our cause, ourselves, and our rights with him. Martyn Lloyd-Jones describes it saying, "The man who is truly meek is the one who is amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do."

Jesus says that the meek will inherit the earth. But this isn't new, this is the principle that God has taught his people from the beginning. Look at Psalm 37 with me. In verses 3-7 we read:

Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!

It's hard to be meek, not thinking about our own desires and our own rights, when we see other people having what we want. The world tells us to grab everything we can while we have the chance. It's especially hard when we see the evil prospering the way the Psalmist describes here. But the Psalmist goes on in verses 10 and 11:

In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.

That's where we see the promise in this third beatitude. That line, "but the meek shall inherit the land," expresses the hope of the Jews all the way back to Abraham. It rests on God's promise to the first patriarch. God covenanted with Abraham and pledged that if Abraham would faithfully follow him, he would provide him with an inheritance: the land of Canaan and the blessing of children who would become a great nation. The immediate promises to Abraham were kind of a sacramental sign, a foretaste and a type, of the full inheritance that God gives us when we become his adopted sons and daughters through the atoning work of Christ. Like Abraham, the meek are those who delight in the Lord, who commit their lives to the Lord, and because of that find their rest in the Lord.

Think of what the world thought of Abraham. He followed God and, while most probably would have seen him as a rich man, the idea that his little enclave would one day possess all of Canaan was a crazy idea. And if you want to talk crazy, look at Jacob. He had the inheritance that had been passed down to him from Abraham, his great-grandfather, but he died in a foreign land living on

Egyptian hospitality – and yet he died not only content with what he had, but confident that God would give the promised inheritance to his children.

The world is constantly trying to get ahead, to get more, and to hold onto what it already has. The world looks for blessedness – for happiness and contentment – in things and never finds it. And so the Christian, having nothing that the world values, finds himself truly blessed with everything that matters – and not just everything that matters, but everything that lasts. St. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:2 that when Judgement Day comes, the things that the World values will go up in smoke, but that we'll stand by Christ and "judge the world."

So here's the practical application: The message that we carry to the world is dependent on our being meek. Too many Christians have forgotten this today. The modern Church wants to fight the influences of the world, the flesh, and the devil on our own strength. We've become good at holding rallies, establishing institutions, and putting together pressure groups, but as a result we're out of practice in doing the real work of building God's Kingdom. We need to rely more on Christ, on grace, and on the plain message of the Gospel instead of our own rhetorical skill or sheer numbers at the polls to influence the world for Christ. We've become like the Pharisees, who wanted to bring the Kingdom of God by legislating his morality, forcing everyone to live by a legalistic code of ethics whether their heart was in it or not. We've become like the Zealots, trying to bring the Kingdom with the sword or with political power. Don't get me wrong. We're called to be salt and light – to be a preserving influence in the world around us, and that does call for our political involvement and for our social action. But I think we too often lose sight of the fact that our main calling is to share the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection with the world, not as I said last week, ranting angrily about the sins of the people around us, but taking it humbly and meekly to others, sharing it one beggar to another. We want the world to be different, but we forget that we're different because we have Jesus. The world needs Jesus too. So we need to pay more attention to what our witness is like to the world. Are we humbly and meekly carrying God's good

news to those who need to hear it because we care for them, or are we proud, moralising, Pharisaical, Christians looking down our noses at the very people whom we were once like before we found Jesus ourselves – looking at them as if we're better because of our own merit. We need to be less concerned with our own rights and with justifying ourselves to the people around us, and more concerned with edifying our brothers and sisters and sharing God's message of redemption with the world. That's what meekness is all about.

Please pray with me:

Our Father, you alone can order the unruly wills and affections of sinful people. We ask you to grant to our foolish hearts and minds a measure of your grace that we might see our nothingness in the light of your great holiness. Move us to be poor in spirit. Move us to mourn sin, so that we can then see the importance of clothing ourselves in meekness, putting away our own perceived rights, putting others ahead of ourselves, and ultimately raising your Gospel above all else; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.