

### The Gospel for Life: Understanding Power

*“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.”* Matthew 5:5

If the second beatitude initially impressed us as the most natural beatitude because everyone knows what it is to be sad, then the third beatitude will probably strike us as the most *unnatural* beatitude, because no one wants to be labeled meek. We said that in order to understand the second beatitude we must distinguish between godly sorrow, the sorrow that leads to repentance, and worldly sorrow, the sorrow that leads to resentment. When it comes to understanding the third beatitude we must distinguish between godly power, the power that leads to redemption, and worldly power, the power that leads to domination.

The beatitudes offer a character description of the follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. They do not prescribe the means of grace; they describe the state of grace. Like Moses in the wilderness, Jesus sets before us a blessing and a curse. There is a marked difference between being poor in spirit and being proud in spirit. Just as there is a great difference between mourning over our sin and being indifferent to our sin. This is true as well for the third beatitude: we either live according to the power of God’s grace or we live according to worldly power.

#### The Meaning of Meekness

No one likes to be labeled meek, at least no self-respecting, self-assertive person, and especially no one who expects to be somebody. For many, meekness means weakness. It is not considered a character quality, but a personality disorder. The very idea of meekness is repulsive to many. It describes someone who feels inadequate, inferior, and helpless. It is linked with passivity and a

lack of courage. It implies the inability to stand up for ourselves and the refusal to meet the challenges of life.

Some people make the mistake of confusing what the world thinks of meekness with what Jesus meant by meekness. One commentator describes the meek this way: “These are the shy ones, the intimidated, the mild, the unassertive. They step off the sidewalk to let others pass as if it were only right, and if something goes wrong around them, they automatically feel it must have something to do with them. When others step forward and speak up, they shrink back, their vocal chords perhaps moving but producing no sound. They do not assert their legitimate claims unless driven into a corner and then usually with ineffectual rage. But as the kingdom of the heavens enfolds them, the whole earth is the Father’s—and theirs as they need it” (Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 117).

Our translations reflect this discomfort with the word “meek.” The New International Version uses the word “meek” only three times and “meekness” only once in the whole Bible (Ps 37:11; Zeph 3:12; Mt 5:5; 2 Cor 10:1). Whereas the Authorized Version (KJV) uses “meek” seventeen times and “meekness” fourteen times. In place of “meek” and “meekness” the NIV prefers to use “poor,” “humble,” “afflicted,” “gentle,” and “gentleness.”

Some Christians might assume erroneously that the third beatitude approves a docile, dependent personality. That it is somehow holier to feel inadequate and inferior. Many falsely assume that becoming the world’s doormat is the cross Christians are called to bear. But this is not what Jesus meant by the character quality of meekness.

As you would expect, the meaning of meekness grows out of its usage in the Old Testament, where it means to be gentle, humble, lowly, considerate and gracious. The meek are open to God’s leading (Ps 25:9) and content with God’s provision (Ps 22:26). Jesus’ third beatitude appears to come directly from Psalm 37. In this psalm David offers an extended commentary on

meekness. Instead of picturing a shy, timid, and fearful person, David pictures the meek as unperturbed by evil people, self-controlled, confident in the Lord, and resolute in their faith and trust in God's sovereign care and justice. David's imperatives on meekness are sharp and concise and highlight true strength of character and inner discipline.

“Do not fret because of evil people...Trust in the Lord and do good...Delight yourself in the Lord...Commit your way to the Lord...Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him...Refrain from anger and turn from wrath...A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found. But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace” (37:1-11).

Meekness is an internal discipline and an intentional reliance upon God to accomplish his will and his work in his way. “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, “the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does...By myself I can do nothing” (Jn 5:19, 30). Meekness is a “conscious suppression of willfulness and a purposeful cultivation of willingness” (Peterson, “Growth: An Act of the Will,” *Leadership* (Fall 1988), 40). According to Augustine the only thing that matters to the meek is pleasing God: “The meek are they, to whom all their good deeds, in all the things they do well, nothing is pleasing but God; to whom in all the evils they suffer, God is not displeasing” (vol. 6 Sermon 31:3, 354).

Meekness is the openness to see God in the big picture of life and to recognize “that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). Meekness leads us to say with Paul, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” and mean it not as a boast but as a confidence. Think of meekness as bold humility or aggressive patience. It is the spiritual discipline that overcomes the world. To be meek in the biblical sense is to be neither mousy nor militant. It strikes the mean between being passive and pushy, cowardly and reckless, lenient and harsh. Meekness is a one word summary

of greatness, but not as the world defines greatness.

Jesus confirmed the meaning of meekness when he said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek (or gentle) and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30).

### **The Will to Power**

The third beatitude concentrates on the difference between relying on God’s power and striving to obtain and maintain our own power. One path leads to submission and service, the other leads to superiority and privilege. God’s power inspires obedience, faith and trust; worldly power triggers ambition, pride, and self-reliance. Worldly power is based on the law of the jungle; God’s power is centered around the throne of the slain Lamb, who is worthy to receive glory and honor and power. Worldly power is captured in Darwin’s thesis, the survival of the fittest, and in Machiavelli’s conviction that the end justifies the means, and Nietzsche’s contention that the essence of man without God is the will to power. Whereas the meaning of godly power is captured in Paul’s saying, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength” (see Phil 4:13) and in God’s word, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:8).

According to Jesus, everything we’ve ever been told about getting ahead in the world is wrong. The world says, “Believe in yourself.” Jesus says, “Believe in me.” The world says, “Strive to be number one.” Jesus says, “The last shall be first, and the first shall be last.” The world says, “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” Jesus says, “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.” The world says, “Don’t get mad, get even.” Jesus

says, “Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.” The world teaches, “Stand up for your rights.” Jesus teaches, “Lay down your life.” The world teaches us to assert ourselves; Jesus teaches us to deny ourselves. The world says the one with the most toys wins; Jesus says, “You can gain the whole world and lose your soul.”

Meekness describes the person who has nothing to prove, no one to impress, no power to acquire and no glory to seek after. The meek do not force their will on others, nor change their will to win the favor of others. The meek can afford to embrace love, humility, gentleness and patience, and reject manipulation, coercion, and deception, because their hearts are at rest and their destiny is secure. There are numerous biblical examples of people who were not consumed by the will to power, but instead were committed to the power of God. Abel, Abraham, Moses and David, to name a few, illustrate the meaning of meekness and the power of God. But the greatest example of meekness is revealed in the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### **The Meekness of God**

In the biblical sense of the word, Jesus was the picture of meekness. He identified himself as such, when he said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle [meek] and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29). The apostle Paul based his ministry on “the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor 10:1) and exhorted the followers of Christ to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” because Christ “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on the cross!” (Phil 2:3-8). The meekness inherent in Jesus’ incarnation and earthly ministry climaxes in his sacrifice on the cross, but the meekness of God is not limited to the second member of the Trinity. As we might have expected, meekness and majesty are perfectly consistent in the Godhead.

Meekness is a fitting description of the living God who reveals himself slowly, personally, and with great reserve. The “hidden God”, as Luther liked to say, is the God who “works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed; who “made known his ways to Moses, and his deeds to the people of Israel: The Lord who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (Ps 103:6-8). The history of redemption is a reflection of God’s meekness. The God of all creation walked with Adam and Eve in the garden and the Lord of the Nations choose to work through Abraham and his descendants to bring about salvation. He called Moses out of the wilderness with a burning bush and revealed his personal name, *I Am*. He anointed David, a man after his own heart, as his representative and he appointed the prophets to declare his word. The climax of God’s great salvation history story is reached in the Incarnation at the point of God’s greatest humility and vulnerability, but the victory of God’s redemptive love is never in doubt. Inherent in this entire history is the meekness of God that seeks to love and forgive, heal and restore, rather than dominate and control. The divine rationale is no secret: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Zech 4:6). The fact that God should work this way is beyond the rationale of fallen human kind and the history of dynasties, dictators, wars and empires.

The meekness of God that is revealed throughout salvation history, is made especially evident in Jesus reticence to claim the title of Messiah and explain the work of the Cross. Why was Jesus reluctant to say boldly, “I am the Messiah!”? Actually, Jesus’ elusive response fits a pattern in which he avoided direct answers to questions about his authority. He was reluctant to publicize his work. When the Jewish religious leaders confronted him, demanding to know by what authority he taught and acted, he declined to comment (Lk 20:1-8). He repeatedly demanded secrecy from those he healed (Mk 1:44; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26), and he insisted on silence when the demon-possessed cried out that Jesus was the Son of God (1:34; Lk 4:41). Even the disciples were warned not tell anyone that he was the Christ (Mt 16:20) or to reveal their experience of

Jesus' Transfiguration (17:9).

True messianic consciousness is disclosed by Jesus precisely in his endeavor to disassociate himself from popular appeal and power politics. Both the masses and the opposition responded to Jesus in nationalistic fervor, seeing him either as a new hero for a popular uprising and a fresh threat to the status quo. On all fronts, Jesus sought to redefine his messiahship according to biblical revelation. For Jesus to have allowed his role to be defined by contemporary messianic expectation would have been tantamount to yielding to the initial temptations in the wilderness. Jesus subjected himself and his followers to the painful course of messianic redefinition in terms anticipated in the Old Testament.

Not until the end did Jesus clearly and publicly admit he was the Messiah. When the high priest asked, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus responded directly, "I am...And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming in the clouds of heaven" (Mk 14:61-62). Helmut Thielicke has observed,

"It is striking that Jesus uses these predicates of majesty when he is being delivered up to death, exposed to humiliation, and plunged into the passion, so that the confession of his messiahship can no longer give a wrong impression of loftiness nor lead to a theology of glory, but engulfs us in the depths of this destiny."

Perhaps there is another dimension that needs to be considered. Jesus freely uses the title of Christ only after the Resurrection, when he can point to the finished work of the Cross and the completion of the Father's will (Lk 24:26, 46). Before he claimed the title for himself, he accomplished all that the Father prepared for him to do. Only then did he employ the title Messiah instead of his familiar self-designation as the Son of Man.

Throughout his humiliation and exaltation Jesus was shown to be what he knew he was, the eternal Son of God. He was “acknowledged Messiah in fact not just *after* his passion and resurrection but *because* of his passion and resurrection—and, it must be insisted, in continuity with his own self-consciousness during the ministry” (Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity*, London: SCM, 1970, 74) (see Acts 2:36; Rom 1:4; Heb 5:8-10). Jesus did not clamor for a title which in itself implied a redemptive accomplishment yet to be fulfilled through the Cross and the Resurrection. Nevertheless, he consistently disclosed that the kingdom of God had come through his own person and work. *God’s meekness was on display in Jesus’ reticence to claim the title Messiah. He did not lay claim to the title until it was obvious that His death on the Cross proved that political power was not the means to finish what the Father sent him to accomplish.*

The meekness of God is also evident in the reserve with which the Gospels explain the Atonement. Publicity would have been completely inconsistent with the preparations that had been made for the Atonement throughout salvation history by means of illustrations, types, and the sacrificial system. God in his meekness has always allowed his actions to speak louder than his words. He did not give Cain and Abel a theology lesson before choosing Abel’s sacrifice and disqualifying Cain’s. He did not carefully explain to Abraham how the command to sacrifice his son Isaac was a picture of the will of the Father in giving up his one and only Son. Nor did God explain to Job that he would take a world of unjust suffering and nail it to the cross. He let King David and the prophets discover that a broken and contrite heart meant more than sacrifices.

It would be foolish to conclude from the lack of publicity and pedantic instruction about the Cross in the Gospels that the meaning of the Cross is somehow disqualified for lack of information and doctrinal explanation. Later, the Epistles will explain and expound on the wonder of the Atonement, but it is helpful to contemplate the reasons for this initial reserve. First of all, there is more going on within the relationships of the triune God than we could begin to imagine,

much less figure out and reduce to bullet points. P. T. Forsyth wisely observes:

“Christ came not to say something, but to do something. His revelation was more action than instruction. He revealed by redeeming. The thing He did was not simply to make us aware of God’s disposition in an impressive way. It was not to *declare* forgiveness. It was certainly not to *explain* forgiveness. And it was not even to bestow forgiveness. It was to *effect* forgiveness, to set up the relation of forgiveness both in God and man. ...The great mass of Christ’s work was like a stable iceberg. It was hidden. It was His dealing with God, not man. The great thing was done with God. It was independent of our knowledge of it. The greatest thing ever done in the world was done out of sight. The most ever done for us was done behind our backs. Only it was we who had turned our backs. Doing this for us was the first condition of doing anything with us” (God the Holy Father, 19).

Secondly, the meekness of God produces a method of relating that good parents can appreciate. It is not the habit of thoughtful, loving parents to document and elaborate on everything they do for their children. It is enough for parents that their children know of their love and benefit from their nurture and care. In time, children grow up and mature and begin to realize how much their parents have done for them. Worldly power is always striving for recognition, promising more than it can deliver, and advancing its own agenda, but that is not how our heavenly Father works.

P. T. Forsyth offers an important perspective:

“It would not be like the grace of God, it would be ungracious, if He came forgiving man and yet laying more stress on what it cost Him to do it than His joy, fulness, and freedom in doing it. You find poor human creatures who never can overlook your mistake without conveying to you that it is as much as they can do. They think no little of themselves for doing it. They take care that you

shall never forget their magnanimity in doing it. They keep the cost of your forgiveness ever before you. And the result is that it is not forgiveness at all. How miserable a thing it is instead! How this spirit takes the charm from the reconciliation! How it destroys the grace of it! How penurious the heart it betrays! How it shrivels the magnanimity it parades! How grudging, how ungodlike it is! How unfatherly! What an ungracious way of dealing with the graceless!”

“That is not God’s way of forgiveness. His Fatherhood has the grand manner. It has not only distinction, but delicacy. He leaves us to *find out* in great measure what it cost—slowly, with the quickened heart of the forgiven, to find that out. Christ never told His disciples He was Messiah till it was borne in on them by contact with Him. He never told them till, by the working of the actual Messiahship upon them, they found it out. Revelation came home to them as discovery. It burst from experience. So gracious is God with His revelation that He actually lets it come home to us as if we had discovered it. That is His fine manner—so to give as if we had found. His shining may even be forgotten in our seeing. And so in a way with our forgiveness it dawns on us. Its freedom gives us the power to see its cost. The crown of the new life is the power not only to enjoy it but to prize it. It is borne in on the forgiven. It is a truth of experience. It is reconciliation taking account of itself. The first condition of forgiveness is not an adequate comprehension of the Atonement, and a due sense of the cost. That is not saving faith. Any adequate idea on that head comes only to the saved....(The Holy Father, p.17; see 1 Cor 2:14).”

The meekness of God is revealed in God the Father’s reserve, and in God the Son’s reticence, and in God the Spirit’s selflessness. Divine meekness has no parallel in the history of man-made gods and in the religions of human origin and invention. And it is essential that we realize that this

meekness is not for show, but is inherent in the will of God and in the internal communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the meekness of the Father that wills to redeem humankind through love and grace. It is the meekness of the Son that proves the Father's will and preserves the integrity of the Incarnation. And it is the meekness of the Spirit who was sent not to speak on his own behalf, but to bear witness to Jesus Christ (Jn 16:13-15). If the triune God chose to reveal, redeem and sanctify us in this way, we ought to embrace meekness as the way of life most consistent with following Christ.

### **The Promise of Meekness**

The strength to be meek lies in the promises of God. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." The reason we can afford to be meek is because of the grace of God in the present and because of the promise of God for the future. It is worth noting that Jesus enlarged the promise expressed in Psalm 37:11 and expanded its meaning. The psalmist envisioned the Promised Land, but Jesus promised the whole earth. The reason we can be meek is because "we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Rom 8:37). We fight not for victory but from victory and the "the weapons we fight with are the not weapons of the world" (2 Cor 10:4). Jesus said it clearly, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

The benefits of meekness are both immediate and everlasting. The third beatitude is a constant reminder to choose God's power over worldly power. Jesus-style meekness makes the yoke of Christ easy and saves us from the burden of worried productivity and wrong-headed activism. It frees Christians from the pressure of a spiritual full-court press designed to prove that we are worthy of God's approval and people's affirmation. Meekness cuts through the sloth and busywork of religious activities and teaches us to rely on Christ rather than our own efforts. Negatively, meekness removes the pressure tactics, manipulation and marketing techniques from

our evangelism and church growth; positively, meekness gives us a love for people and an ability to approach people with a genuine concern for their welfare and their relationship to God. Meekness refuses to fret because of evildoers and rejects any militancy that would force people to follow God against their will. Meekness heals and strengthens our easily bruised egos and over-sensitive spirits by refocusing our lives on Christ.

It is helpful to be around people who are meek, because they tend to make us better Christians than we want to be. The most powerful people in the Kingdom of God are not those who exude self-confidence and success, nor are they the busybodies who lay a guilt-trip on others, nor are they the excitable saints who show off their emotions for all to see. When Paul and Merry Long were among the Baluba people of the Kasai in Congo back in 1954 they met Tshiela Harieta, a graceful old African woman. Tshiela had been the third wife of an important tribesman across the river. When her husband died she was faced with two choices: she could either become a prostitute or a shaman. Since she had become a follower of Jesus Christ shortly before her husband died she refused both options and fled across the river to become a member of the New Tribe. Tshiela worked at the mission hospital carrying for the patients who had no family members to help them or to cook meals for them. Often she would show up at the screen door of the Long's home in search of food for needy patients. Paul was not always pleased to see Tshiela because it usually meant giving up something that was in short supply, such as meat, to feed a total stranger. One morning Tshiela arrived in their yard with an old naked woman, who was not a Christian and from another tribe. Annoyed, Paul declined Tshiela's request to help clothe the woman on grounds that he would be showing partiality. Since he couldn't help them all, he should not help just one. Undeterred, Tshiela left, only to return a short time later. She gave her characteristic greeting, and when Paul came to the door, he found Tshiela outside on the back porch squatting—naked like the old woman who had come in the morning. Paul asked her why she was naked and she explained that she had given her clothes to the old woman. "Then I guess you will sleep cold tonight, Tshiela," Paul said with firmness.

“Oh no, Muambi, “ Tshiela replied. “I gave my dress away because you could not show partiality to the pagan woman with all the others around us in need, and that is right. But I am of the New Tribe of the Jesus People and you could not leave me in need, could you?”

A little while later Tshiela padded down the path toward the hospital wearing a new dress and a new blanket draped around her shoulders. She thanked Paul with a happy laugh and departed singing her funny little song about the goodness of God. Paul remembers the meekness of Tshiela and her ability to help him be a better Christian that he would have been without her.

Only the meek can say with the apostle, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). The meek find in the message of the cross the power and wisdom of God. Instead of a spirit of timidity and weakness or a spirit of pride and coercion, they have been given the Spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline (2 Tim 1:7).