

Be Attitudes: “Be Meek”

Matthew 5:5 – May 23, 2010, Pentecost and Graduate Sunday

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

During the nineteenth century colonial days of India, a missionary was instructing a Hindu man on the Beatitudes. When he came to the blessing of meekness, the Hindu man retorted: “Sir, the Englishman may inherit the earth, but if you called him meek, he would be insulted.” So true. But why? Jesus has called us to meekness. We want to be transformed by Christ. So why would we be insulted to be characterized by one of Christ’s top eight attitudes?

Part of the reason is that we have misunderstood some of what biblical meekness is. We have mistranslated this attitude to mean spinelessness and weakness. Who would not be insulted to be called a doormat!

But part of the reason is that we actually have understood some of what biblical meekness is, and we don’t like it! Meekness is the disciplined use of power. It is strength grown tender. It is gentleness. Mildness. The word is used of a powerful domesticated animal that accepts the control of another. A horse under the reins. An ox yoked to a cart. Meekness was a classic Greek virtue which Aristotle described as the mean between anger and indifference. Try these translations on: “Blessed is the person who is always angry at the right time, and never angry at the wrong time.” “Blessed is the gentle spirited person, the tame person, the person who does not have an arrogant bone in their body.”

Part of the reason we might be insulted to be called meek is that meekness critiques our misuses of power. It asks us the soul-searching questions: “How do I live with integrity? How do I virtuously handle the authority I have – in my home, at my job, in my church? How do I reject destructive power and embrace creative power? How do I change from wielding worldly power to being spiritually empowered?”

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. We need some better models than the doormat ones that normally come to mind for what biblical meekness is. I have several people whom I associate with authentic biblical meekness. Vernon is one. He is my friend since childhood. A year older and twice as big – since we were kids. He was the gentle giant of my childhood.

My childhood summer afternoons were spent trying to escape the scorching Florida heat. That was before the days of home air conditioning. So, off to the city pool we went, two blocks from my house. After a tortuous barefooted run across the melting asphalt convenient store parking lot, I made it to the pool. After showering off, I looked for Vernon and my other buddies. We would gather in the shallower end of the pool and wrestle. Lifeguards were much more lenient in those days, so we wrestled in the water until we were completely worn out – we were, but not Vernon! It was usually two or three of us versus Vernon, and he always prevailed. He laughed the whole time and never became angry as he swatted his skinny buddies off like horseflies.

Big Vernon grew up to become a Baptist pastor. And he was a fine one with a big voice and a big heart. An authentically biblically meek one. But a few years ago I guess he ran into the kind of worldly power that likes to hang out in the church. And he couldn’t swat it off like a horsefly, and I think he stopped laughing. So now Vernon is an excellent high school biology teacher.

Frankly, after thirty-five years of pastoral ministry, most of the colleagues I started this journey with are doing something else. And most of the reasons have to do with worldly power in the church. “*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*” But in the mean time, they may need to find another job!

Another person I associate with meekness is a very unlikely sounding one: Retired Marine Corps Colonel, 32nd degree Mason and Mayor, Wilson Cook. He was the Chairman of the Deacons of Seminole First Baptist Church where I served in the 80’s. He enlisted in the Marines as a seventeen-year-old, island hopped across the Pacific in World War II, saw more combat in Korea and Vietnam. Then he retired to Florida, opened a real estate office and got into politics.

Wilson was the consummate southern gentleman. From south Georgia, beautiful, cultured accent, genteel ways. Disciplined. Powerful yet virtuous. Tame. One Sunday morning, as we sang the invitation hymn, a guy walked in off the busy six-lane road in front of the church. He was shirtless, obviously on drugs with a wild-eyed, disheveled look, and had an eight inch hunting knife strapped to his leg! He wildly made his way down the aisle to me, and Wilson followed right behind him! Before I could give him the proper pastoral handshake and inquire of his spiritual need, Wilson, the gentleman, asked: “Sir, may I be of any assistance?” Which being interpreted is: “Buddy, if you reach for that knife, this Marine is going to storm your beach!”

Wilson, the Meek. Strength under control. The disciplined, protective, even genteel use of power. *Blessed are the meek*, for they are often our protectors! They know when and how to act!

The Bible describes two great heroes as meek, one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. Moses is described as *very meek, above all men* (Num. 12:3). But Moses had to learn this “be attitude.” God had to tame him, to domesticate him, to turn him into the gentle giant of a protective leader that he became. His early anger expressed in the wrong way led him to murder an Egyptian and have to run for his life. But this wild man was tamed in the wilderness as he tended sheep for forty years. And he left the wilderness as the greatest leader of the Old Testament. He led slaves to become a disciplined, traveling, worshipping community. He stood up to Pharaoh. He wielded the miraculous and protecting rod of God. He brought the life-giving law of God. He kept the people from starving during forty years in the wilderness. He was used by God to deliver the people of promise into the Promised Land. The furthest thing in the Old Testament from a doormat!

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. They are the children of promise, the children of the Promised Land! They will be mightily used of God and mightily blessed by God. But first they have to be tamed. First they have to have their murderous anger transformed into life-giving meekness.

As with Jesus' other Be Attitudes, this one is also autobiographical. Later in Matthew, chapter 11, Jesus describes himself as meek with this same beatitude word: ²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take 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. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

It is no coincidence that Jesus talks about meekness, gentleness in the context of being domesticated like an ox who takes on the yoke of discipline. Jesus is that spiritual gentle giant who invites us to connect ourselves to him and be taught by him. He invites us to be yoked with him through Christian discipline and learn to utilize the power he gives us to pull the load he gives us. Yoked to him we will refuse to manipulate others through the undisciplined use of power, as he refused when tempted to jump off the Temple or turn the rocks of Judea into wonder bread. Yoked to him we will become a meek, gentleperson, like he was who could attract little children and also say “woe is you” to the power abusers. Yoked to Jesus we will learn the disciplined use of power that will never run roughshod over the weak, that will not even break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick, but *will faithfully bring forth justice (Is 41:3)*

Blessed are the meek, for they will be transformed by Christ! They will be yoked to his power through the grace of spiritual discipline!

Graduates, let me say a few words to you. One of my favorite authors, Richard Foster, wrote a book with the catchy title of Money, Sex and Power. In it he challenges Jesus followers to take seriously today the vows that monks have taken since the middle ages: vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Vows to discipline the use of money, sex and power. Every time I participate in a ministerial ordination or the calling of a ministerial staff member, I give the same speech: I challenge them to live as a Baptist monk!

Over my years as a pastor, the vast majority of failings that I have observed by pastors and lay people alike have been because of their failures to discipline their use of money, sex or power. So I want to challenge you as you graduate soon and go out to build your houses made of brick: Live under the discipline of your gentle spiritual giant, Jesus. Live with the disciplined use of money, sex and power. Live as Baptist monks!

This Be Attitude can help you, especially with the disciplined use of the power and influence you will be developing in the coming years! It can help us all! *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*. Go out, yoked to Jesus, and claim your inheritance!