



The Strength of Meekness

GraceLife: April 17, 2005

© 2005 by Don Green. All rights reserved.

For those of you who have been here, you know that we are in the middle of the study on the Beatitudes as part of our broader study of the Sermon on the Mount. I have done four messages now on this series and we are only two verses into the Sermon on the Mount. We are addressing these Beatitudes carefully because they are foundational to the Sermon on the Mount and to Christian character.

Everything in the Sermon on the Mount assumes what we are learning in the Beatitudes. So we want to get these Beatitudes right and not rush through them. We want these things to impact us as fully as God intends for them to do.

It is important for us to realize that because, if we are not careful, it is easy for us to read the Beatitudes and assume that Jesus is describing our existing character when we first read them. If you read the Beatitudes and think Jesus is describing the way that you are now, you probably need to read them again and again.

It is only when we study these Beatitudes carefully that we realize how profoundly they challenge the very core of our being. The Beatitudes rebuke us, every one of us (including me), when we understand them properly.

And yet, we don't mind that rebuke, because these Beatitudes beckon us to a better spiritual life. They beckon us away from spiritual mediocrity and call us to a life of holiness. I trust that most of you welcome that call because you want to live a life that is worthy of the Lord who lived, died and rose again to secure your salvation.

But these Beatitudes also promise untold blessings for the people of this character. People of this character and those people alone are the ones who possess the kingdom of heaven. They are the ones who are truly born again. This is the life that flows from being born again.

This isn't the life that you attain to in order to enter the kingdom of heaven on your own merits. No. This is what spiritual life under the lordship of Jesus Christ looks like. These are the characteristics that are manifested to one degree or another in the life of everyone who is truly redeemed.

So it is important for us. This is the heart of Christian living. In a sense, that would be a good title to a good book on the Beatitudes—*The Heart of Christian Living*—because they all go to the matter of Christian character.

Now, there is a logical progression to these Beatitudes. They flow naturally from one another and in some ways they get progressively more searching as they develop.

In Matthew 5:3, Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” We said that refers to a personal recognition that you are spiritually bankrupt before God. You have no spiritual merit before Him. You have no spiritual righteousness of your own and you actually deserve His judgment.

Jesus pronounces blessing on people who understand that because they are the ones who possess the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven will be populated entirely and exclusively by people who realize that they do not deserve to be there—people whose recognition of their spiritual bankruptcy has caused them to flee to Christ and put their faith in Christ for salvation.

Then in Matthew 5:4, Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” We said last week that this is the emotional reaction that flows from your sin and spiritual bankruptcy. You mourn over the fact that you are sinful. You don’t glory in your sin, you mourn over it. You are crushed by it. We said that mourning was a humble grief over your sinfulness that leads you to repentance and the conscious pursuit of righteousness. Mourning. Humble grief. You are broken over the fact that you are not what God says you should be.

Now today as we come to Matthew 5:5, we are going to see that spiritual mourning changes our attitudes and influences the responses that we make to people and to circumstances. And that change is comprehensive. It is absolutely comprehensive. The depth that it searches us is just incredible because what do you have in life except for circumstances and people? Every circumstance and every person in your life is affected by this verse, Matthew 5:5:

Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

Now, I need to make a little qualification. I came close to preaching out of a version other than NASB this week. NASB translates this term “gentle.”

But if you look in your New King James Version (for those who have *The MacArthur Study Bible*), the King James or the NIV, they all translate this term as “the meek”. “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.” “Meekness” is the term I want to use today, although it is always going to be “gentle” in the NASB.

My reason for that approach is that “gentle” has a more narrow meaning. It doesn’t embrace everything that falls into the richness of this term. The Greek term translated here includes gentleness. “Gentleness” is a good translation of the term, but I think that it doesn’t exhaust the meaning. So I want to use a word that is a little bit more flexible than gentle. That’s why we are going to use the term “meekness” here this morning. We are going to spend most of our time trying to fill in some meaning to that term.

Commentators struggle mightily to define this term. You can't find a consistent definition from one commentator to another. English doesn't have a term to embrace it.

Let me start by telling you briefly what meekness is not because it is easy to have a wrong view of meekness. We have to cleanse our minds of misunderstandings so we can understand what the term is really addressing.

What Meekness Is Not

First of all, being meek is not simply being nice. Meekness does not refer to someone who is naturally nice and non-aggressive. You could say that about a dog. "That dog is nice . . . and look, he is not even very aggressive!"

We are not looking at canine carnality here. We are looking for something more than a disposition that you could say about an animal. Obviously, Jesus is talking about something more than that. What we are aiming for is biblical meekness in all its richness. So it is not simply about being "nice."

Also, it is important to realize that meekness is not about being weak. Jesus Himself was perfectly meek by His own testimony. Jesus was meek. Jesus was gentle and humble of heart. And yet that very same Jesus who was perfectly meek is the same Jesus who took whips and cleaned out the temple. Jesus is the same one who rebuked the religious leaders of His day.

So there is a strength and a power in meekness that is not present in somebody who is weak and shy and retiring. Meekness is not a limp wrist in the midst of life.

But if it is not being nice, if it is not being weak, then what is it? What I want to do today is lay out six aspects of true biblical meekness for you that will help you grow in your walk with Christ. Six different elements of meekness; all coming straight from the Scriptures. Six aspects of meekness so that you can see what your character is supposed to look like as you walk with Christ.

Now, what I want to do at this point is simply give you a working definition of meekness and then we will add elements to it as we go. Here is how I define meekness based on my study of the Scriptures.

Meekness is spiritual composure, rooted in trust in God, which responds in peace to criticism, difficult people, or difficult circumstances.

Okay? We will come back to that definition. Point #1 that I want to lay out for you is:

1. Meekness is a Work of God

You are familiar with Galatians 5:22-23. At least you will be soon if you are not. It says:

"The Strength of Meekness"
© 2005 by Don Green. All rights reserved.
thegracelifepulpit.com

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness (that's same term that we find in Matthew 5:5) self control.

The main fruit of the Spirit includes this idea of gentleness. The Bible teaches us that this meekness, this gentleness, is a work of the Spirit of God in the lives of the redeemed. And where the Spirit of God is working out meekness, we can know that there is blessing and there is divine approval on that life.

But it is something that the Spirit has to work out in your life because you as a fallen man or a fallen woman in your natural sinful condition, you cannot be meek as the Bible defines it. Probably no wonder that "meekness" has fallen out of the English language. There is just not enough of it to go around to keep it as a term that is important to have in our conversation.

But one of the ways that the Spirit of God works out meekness in your life is through informing your understanding by the Word of God. When you understand what meekness is, and you accept it as the guiding principle of the way you respond to people and circumstances, then you have a goal that you can aim for.

You can respond to those things with a meek spirit and ask the Spirit of God to help you flesh this out in your life. As a Christian, you already have the Spirit dwelling within you. That means biblical meekness is attainable for you because it resides already in your heart in seed form through the indwelling Spirit.

My prayer for you this morning is that the Spirit of God would bring that force to fruition in your lives.

So meekness is the work of God. We have to look to God in humble dependency, in humble spiritual bankruptcy, and say, "I cannot do this on my own, God. I need you to work that out through me and I pray with confidence that you will because I know that it is what you want." We ask Him to develop in us that which He Himself requires and that which He says He Himself will bless.

Now, if meekness is the work of God (and it is), we can easily see that our second point must be true and that is this:

2. Meekness Starts in Your Heart

Turn to Matthew 11. There are a couple of verses that are important for you to see here. Matthew 11:29. Jesus said:

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.

Jesus says that His heart is filled with this gentleness, filled with this meekness. It was an indispensable part of His character. It isn't something that you just *do*. Meekness starts with who you are and the way that you think and the way you meditate and the way that you react.

It isn't surprising that Jesus' own heart would be meek and humble. If meekness is a fruit of the Spirit of God, then we would expect to see it in the Son of God. And that's exactly what Jesus says. And so it starts in the heart.

There is another place we need to see this from. You see this term used in 1 Peter 3:4. Peter, in addressing wives and addressing their submission to their husbands, says:

Let [your adornment] be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle [there is that word again] and quiet spirit which is precious in the sight of God.

Peter comes to these women and says, "Here is what your *heart* should look like." It should be gentle. It should be quiet. That heart quality is precious in the sight of God. So it starts with your heart attitudes. Gentleness—meekness—is an attitude that you are to cultivate in your own heart.

So right away we are forced to some measure of self-examination as we deal with this Beatitude. What is your heart like? Are you marked by general contentment you're your circumstances and a generally peaceful approach to your relationships—particularly in your family, with your spouse, and with your children? Or are you filled with anxiety and conflict?

The Lord wants you to know the blessing of meekness and it is your spiritual responsibility to pursue it and to see this developed in your own heart. If this meekness isn't resident in your heart and isn't flourishing in your spiritual life, then there is no way it will truly be manifested in your relationships and as you respond to circumstances.

So that's point #2. We are breezing through these a lot more quickly than I would like. All I can do is introduce these things to you and trust that God will work in your hearts so that you come back to these things during the week and work them out in your own hearts.

That's what really has to happen with these Beatitudes. I can convey the meaning to you maybe in 45 minutes. But to work it out in your life is something that doesn't take place on Sunday morning. It is an ongoing, day-by-day process that you are responsible to work out on your own. All I can do in a time like this is stimulate your thinking a little bit.

So meekness is the work of God. It starts in your heart. That leads us to point #3.

3. Meekness Trusts God

I want you to turn to Psalm 37 because it will help our understanding of Matthew 5:5. “Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth” is almost a direct quote from Psalm 37:11, which says:

The humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

That is the same idea that Jesus is picking up on and expanding upon in the Beatitudes. When you look at Psalm 37:11 in its context, you start to get a fullness of everything that it means. Prior to verse 7, the Psalmist has been declaring a profound trust in God despite what was happening around him:

Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes. Cease from anger and forsake wrath; do not fret; it leads only to evildoing. For evil doers will be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord, they will inherit the land. Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; and you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there. But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity (Psalm 37:7-11).

And so you see in this Psalm this utter confidence in the sovereign goodness of God and in the sovereign justice of God. David looks around and sees wicked men prospering, just like you do. You see people advancing who by character should not be advancing and you are tempted to say, “What’s going on here? Where is the Lord in all of this? Why are wicked people prospering?” It is the same principle expressed in Psalm 73.

What meekness does is rest in the sovereign goodness of God and the fact that ultimately He will settle all of the accounts. Ultimately, He will bring about perfect justice, even though for a period of time (maybe during the entire period of your life), it may seem like the wicked are getting away with it. It may seem like arrogant people are the ones who rise to prominence, not the humble and meek.

What you must do as a believer, as one who is working out meekness in your life, is step back from that and say, “You know what? There is a sense in which I don’t care what happens in this life. I don’t care what happens with the wicked and whether they advance or not, because I know the outcome. I know the final score before this game is over. God wins, His principles of justice will be vindicated, and those of us who have pursued a life of humility and meekness and humble trust in Him will be honored. We will be rewarded even if that reward is delayed during this time on earth.”

This is a side point. But this is where I think this is one of the main dangers of Christians who are tied up in politics. They think they have to work out the politics of things in this life. Their spiritual well-being rises and falls on the latest election. What a tragic approach to spiritual life.

People of God throughout the millennia have known nothing but wicked people ruling over them. And so what is it about us as Americans that makes us think that we are exempt from that? How many of us were worked up during the Clinton years? But where is he now? What is his role now? He rose up for a time, but already is fading away; certainly from the power and prosperity he had as president.

My point is not to refute Clinton here, but to tell you that we just have to live above all of that and not tie our spiritual fortunes to who is in power at any given moment. That is a totally wrong approach to spiritual life. It is no wonder that people that are wrapped up in that are always agitated and worried about the next piece of legislation coming down.

You as a meek believer have to rise above all of that and say, “My hope doesn’t rest in anything governmental. My hope rests in the Lord and I am going to rest in Him and I am going to be patient no matter how long it takes. Because I am utterly convinced that God will do what is good in the end.”

And so in Psalm 37 you see this humility and meekness, trusting the Lord despite the prosperity of the wicked. Meekness refuses to worry when the seemingly wrong person experiences prominence or prosperity. It is just irrelevant.

The meek believer rests his hope in the Scriptures that say that the wicked will be cut off, the righteous will be blessed, and humble faith will ultimately be rewarded.

There is another really personal application to this. One writer said, “The meek wait for God to bring about judgment of wrongdoers and do not seek to compete with them or extract personal vengeance.”

If God grants prosperity to the wicked for a time, you don’t seek to compete with that. You don’t fight over climbing the ladder with them. Let them have it. You stick to the game. You be meek. You trust the Lord and leave vengeance to Him. That’s the idea of meekness.

When you are convinced of that and live it out, it brings a composure to your soul that lets you be content in the midst of adversity and criticism. Beloved, God promises that faithful believers will have it well in the end. They will inherit the earth.

I would rather have the eternal prosperity that that implies than anything temporal. Take it all from me now if that’s what it takes. Just let me know where I’m going to be in the end. If you know where you’re going to be in the end, then the other stuff doesn’t really matter. You have to embrace that. You have to come to grips with that, welcome it, and say, “That *is* what I want.”

Fourth point for today:

4. Meekness Is Teachable

Turn to the book of James with me. James 1:19:

This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility (that's our word there, translated elsewhere "gentleness" or "meekness") receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

So meekness has a teachable, submissive, and non-argumentative spirit that longs to know God's word and obey Him in every area. The godly sorrow of mourning we saw in Matthew 5:4 softens the heart and makes it receptive to the word of God. It makes you receptive to those who bring it to you, whether in preaching or in a private admonition from a fellow believer. Meekness realizes it doesn't know everything and welcomes God's Word to inform its understanding and transform its attitudes and actions.

The apostle Paul lived out this kind of meekness. His first words after his conversion sum it all up. After the Lord appeared to him, he said: "Lord, what shall I do?" (Acts 22:10). In other words, "Teach me, and I will follow. I will obey." That is the teachable spirit that is inherent in meekness.

So you understand that meekness is a work of the Spirit of God in your life. It is an attitude that trusts God that begins in your heart and results in a teachable spirit. Godly people are teachable people.

We could say that there is a definite God-ward dimension in everything that we said so far about meekness. It is the work of God in your heart, it trusts God, and it is teachable in response to the word of God.

But beloved, meekness is not just a matter of your attitudes and your private devotion before God. Not at all. As I said earlier, meekness affects every relationship in your life whether it is your spouse or the clerk at the fast food store. Because it flows from your heart, it interacts with everybody that you come into contact with.

Here is the point. You cannot separate meekness toward God from meekness toward men. If meekness is being worked out in your heart by the Spirit of God, it is going to spill over into all of your relationships.

If it is not spilling over into your relationships, then you need to step back and say, "What's wrong with my relationship with God that meekness isn't manifested in my life?"

So point #5 is this:

5. Meekness Is Peaceable

I love that term. Meekness is peaceable. Turn to James 3:13, which says:

"The Strength of Meekness"
© 2005 by Don Green. All rights reserved.
thegracelifepulpit.com

Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.

There is our word again. Gentleness. Meekness. James says, let your life flow out of the gentleness of wisdom, the meekness of wisdom. Then draws out the contrast in verse 14:

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth (James 3:14).

One of the thermometers that you can place in your soul and take your spiritual temperature when it comes to meekness is to ask yourself whether you have jealousy towards something or someone else in your heart. Jealousy is at odds with meekness. James says that meekness expresses itself in good deeds, which are in contrast with jealousy and self-promoting ambitions. Meekness makes you ask yourself what ladder you're trying to climb.

Colossians 3:12-13 helps us understand this further. You can know a man by the company that he keeps, right? You can understand this term "meekness" by the other terms that it is used with and the context in which it is used. That's why we are going through these scriptures.

Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness (there's our word again) and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you (Colossians 3:12-13).

Meekness results in a forgiving spirit, a spirit that is quick to forgive and lay aside grudges in a hurry. It doesn't harbor bitterness. It doesn't rehearse over and over again wrongs that have been done to it. Meekness is expressed in a forgiving attitude when you have been wronged.

We could say that meekness is not animated by a spirit of retaliation. "I'm going to get mine. You'll pay for that." There is none of that in meekness.

We would expect to find a place where that is demonstrated in the life of Christ. Think through His passion. Think about the spit on His face, the blows to His face, being blindfolded, the crowns of thorns crushed into His head, carrying an undeserved cross, bearing the taunts. How did He respond to that? 1 Peter 2:23 says:

While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.

So Jesus lived out the spirit of meekness even under the most adverse circumstances. He was provoked—or perhaps better said—the people tried to provoke Him, but He did not

return in kind. He simply entrusted Himself to the Father all the way to the point of death.

Beloved, I know that people have wronged you. I know that you haven't always gotten what seems to be fair in your life. But you have to understand as a meek Christian, that you don't carry that around with you. You just lay it aside.

William Hendrickson said it well when he said, "Meekness describes the person who is not resentful. He bears no grudge. Far from mulling over injuries received, he finds refuge in the Lord and commits his way entirely to Him."

Now I'm going to get personal. You should see that your meekness is tested not when things are prosperous or when things are going well for you. That is no test of meekness whatsoever. If finances are good for you and your life is generally happy right now, praise the Lord because every perfect gift comes from Him. But that doesn't test your meekness. Anyone can be agreeable when you have prosperity and people are praising you.

No. Your meekness is tested in the way that you respond to criticism and adversity. That is the test. When disappointments and insults and unfair criticism come, that is when you rise to the occasion of meekness and say, "Lord, *now* I will manifest the meekness that my Savior Himself manifested when He was crucified. I am not going to fight back. I am not going to retaliate. I am not going to be angry and carry grudges because Lord, I want You to work out the work of the Spirit in my life. I am going to trust you and put my hand over my mouth."

You see beloved, these Beatitudes describe the fruit of a dynamic that operates on your character. That is why it is so searching. That is why we can't take a superficial view of this. The natural man always wants to strike back. He always wants to argue the point.

What the Lord teaches us that the life of a believer is different. That is why believers through the centuries have been distinct. That is why they could pray and witness while they were being crucified. Because they were meek, they didn't feel the need to retaliate. They entrusted themselves entirely to a loving God who knew what was best. In the process, they glorified Him.

Beloved, whatever those adverse people and circumstances are in your life, praise God for it right now and say, "Here's my opportunity to glorify You in the way that I respond." The man or the woman who truly belongs to the kingdom of heaven is capable of demonstrating that meekness no matter what the provocation is.

So let me ask you. How do you react when people offer you even constructive criticism? Even if they are unkind, what is your response? Your answer is the measure of your meekness. Beloved, you need to cultivate this non-retaliatory spirit when you find yourself injured, passed over or violated. You never have justification to lash back or to nurse those bitter grudges.

I would venture to say there are people here this morning who have been nursing grudges for years. This is your opportunity to lay it aside, put it to rest, kill it—and honor God in the process. Those grudges are not worthy of the Son of God.

As I look back over the things that have discouraged me and made me angry over the years, generally without exception, I've been thrown off because I was nursing a bitter grudge against someone I thought had wronged me. Working through that has just been so liberating. I am carrying less baggage that I used to.

Beloved, if you are a Christian, you have the Spirit of God within you. You can do this. You can live this way. Your character can be marked by this. You should be yearning for it and longing for it.

Point #6. Let me just lay it out for you briefly.

6. Meekness Has a Great Reward

Jesus says:

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

The Bible teaches us particularly in Revelation 20:4-6 that the time will come when Christ returns and establishes His millennial kingdom. When He comes and reigns over the earth, we as believers are going to reign with Him. We will know that inheritance in full. The momentary, light affliction of this life of difficult people and difficult circumstances is going to be forgotten because we are going to know the fullness and the greatness of reigning with Christ and being a part of His kingdom.

One writer said, “Christian hope looks forward to ruling with Christ over all the globe and ultimately to enjoying Him in an entirely recreated earth and heaven.”

Arrogant people are not going to be there. While we can respond to them graciously now, we are not going to miss them when we are with Christ. So beloved, when trials come, be patient and trust in the Lord without complaining. When people criticize you, be gracious. Don't retaliate. When people correct you, be teachable and respond to their wisdom.

Why?

Because it is through the life of meekness that God will abundantly supply the kingdom to you. Persevere and know that it is through this approach to life that you will know fullness of joy. Embrace the strength of meekness and know the grace of Christ upon your life.

Let's pray together.

Lord, we just commend this all to you. We rushed through some of it, but Father, we just ask that you would accomplish your work, that you would make us like Christ, being gentle and humble in heart and that that would manifest itself in the way that we trust You in adversity and the way that we respond to difficult people. Father, make us distinct by making us like Christ.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

This transcript was prepared by Shari Main.