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Truths to Live By: Meekness is not Weakness

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TEXT: Matthew 5:5 (ESV)

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

What are the marks of a heart that has been radically changed by the grace of God? While Jesus has the answers to that question in the Beatitudes—blessed are the poor in spirit, those depending on God's grace, he says—and blessed are those who mourn over sin. And today he tells us, blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. We struggle a bit with this one. We have a truth from Jesus that is completely contrary to the beliefs of our dog-eat-dog and rugged individualistic worldview. It sounds rather silly and untrue and impossible. “Blessed are the meek?” we think, “They inherit the earth? No way. They only get run over by the world. That's a pipe dream.” Everyone knows the old adage: “Nice guys finish last.” Well, this response is due mostly to a misunderstanding of the word “meek.” Unfortunately, “meek” rhymes with “weak,” and that's where our minds tend to automatically go. And when we see the word, we think it means being wimpy, spineless, timid, a milquetoast, and easily pushed around.

But that's not what Jesus was thinking when he said, “Blessed are the meek.” It turns out that meekness is not weakness at all. In extra-biblical literature, this Greek term, “meek,” was a word used to describe a stallion that's been tamed and brought under control. The strength is there, but now it's under someone's control. You could even describe a horse like that as being gentle—a word that's used interchangeably with “meek” in our Bibles, by the way. Meekness is not weakness, but power and strength now under control—all God's control.

Aristotle also used the word to describe the golden mean, the point between extreme anger and extreme anger looseness. A meek person is controlled, balanced, even-keeled, only getting angry at the right time for the right reasons. Meekness was also used to describe one who uses carefully chosen words that soothe strong emotions and also used as a description of someone who's polite and courteous, treating others with dignity and respect.

So, in talking about meekness, Jesus is thus describing a positive spiritual characteristic of the Christian heart and soul. It's strength under God's control, submitted to God, displayed in gentleness, calming words, and courteous actions towards others. Meekness is an inwrought, God-decorated grace of the soul, and the exercise of it is first and chiefly towards God. It begins there, understanding ourselves as dependent upon God and sinful in His sight, but now saved by His grace. We don't fight against God and struggle and contend with Him any longer. Instead, we trust Him and submit ourselves to Him and His purposes. We humbly put ourselves under His control. In Scripture, meekness is often linked closely with the word "humble." We humble ourselves, we walk humbly with God, seeking to serve and please Him and do His will in response to what He has done for us through Jesus because we're His.

So what does that look like in the flesh? Well, the best picture I have found of meekness is looking at the picture of Jesus. His life captures the essence of meekness—perfect meekness, by the way, because unlike you and me, he was without sin. In fact, Jesus used that word "meek" to describe himself when he invited people to come to him and take his yoke upon them and learn from him, for he was meek and lowly in heart, gentle. He was making a positive statement here about himself and how he worked in order to encourage people to follow him and allow them to teach him. He wanted them to know that he had their best interests in mind. He was trustworthy. He had not come to oppress and control them like the Pharisees and scribes did with all their rules and legalism. And he was not out to use them, pursuing his own self-interests at the expense of others, as others in the religious and governmental establishments were doing. He was not one who used cruelty, bribes, or threats in his ministry, but instead, he compassionately used his power to serve instead of being served. He went so far as to wash the feet of his disciples, the work of a servant, in the upper room the night before he was crucified for the sins of the world.

While it's the common assumption that a person is only meek because he or she is unable to help themselves, nothing could be further from the truth about Jesus. Our Lord was anything but that. He was meek because he had the infinite resources of God at his command. He was God-controlled and had God-confidence. He knew who He was and how the Father loved him and had his back, and would vindicate him in the end. Therefore, he had no need to strive for power or defend himself against insults or lash out against those who sought to hurt him. He was in God's loving hands, submitted. So Jesus trusted God and moved forward, always submitting Himself—His heart, soul, strength, and mind—carrying out His father's will, no matter what the personal cost might be to himself, even death on a cross.

On that first Palm Sunday, he entered Jerusalem as a king unlike any other king, meek and mounted on a donkey instead of a stallion. He washed the feet of his disciples, as we talked about earlier in this message. When he was unjustly arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, he didn't call down his angels to save him, though He said he could have, but he would not. He didn't curse and lash out at those who nailed him to the cross and mocked him. Instead, he prayed for their forgiveness and entrusted himself to God's care. He set all self-interest aside, renounced his power over others to calmly and meekly suffer and die for their sins. His main focus, you see, was to carry out God's redemptive will. So he's the perfect portrait of meekness, isn't he? Strength and power under control—the suffering servant who's gentle and calm towards others, even those who were hostile towards him.

It's no wonder, then, that in 2 Corinthians 10, we find the Apostle Paul making his appeal by the meekness and gentleness of Christ to those Christians who were not sure they believed in what Paul was teaching. It's a perennial temptation for Christian leaders or gifted ones in the church to assert their authority by throwing their weight around and giving orders to everybody else. But Paul was striving to lead with the meekness and gentleness of Christ. We see he also encouraged Christ-like meekness as an attitude for all Christian believers to exercise towards each other and other people, trusting in God to work through that meekness to maintain love among church members and perhaps bring about saving faith in non-believers.

Theologian A.W. Tozer says, "Whether we're contesting a point, responding to criticism, or speaking of the hope within, we can do so in meekness with quiet confidence. For in back of the softness within us lies the strength and power of God." And in the book of

James, his New Testament letter, he commends Christian meekness—the exercise of wisdom from above, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere. Pastor John Piper, in reference to this meekness as described in James, writes, "Meekness does not mean the absence of passion and conviction and even indignation for the glory of God. But it does mean that we don't have hair triggers. It does mean that our disposition is one of being slow to anger and ready to listen as well."

Here's a good example I came across about the power of exercising Christ-like meekness. NPR ran a story about a father and son that aired on the hit radio show "This American Life." The episode was titled "Know When to Fold Them," and it focuses on David Dickerson's return to the Christian household. He had not visited since he'd left for college. It's ten years later as he goes back as a hostile 28-year-old, and he tells of how he wanted to undermine his father's, quote, "repressive faith." Here's how he tells it:

I had all the ammunition, and I couldn't wait to use it. And I remember thinking, 'This is a showdown' because my dad and I were at war. My dad didn't know this, but I was at war with him. I was at war with all Christians. And I was just waiting for an excuse to have a shot at him.

So when his father innocently mentioned some mission work he'd been praying about, David unleashed his fury. He says, "I just rambled on and on like this. And I knew essentially while I was doing this, I was assaulting his dream, you know, saying everything he was excited about, that he was sharing with me, was misbegotten, a bad idea, morally corrupt." And he just kind of quietly let me do my thing and listened to me. David's father let him expound, expand every round of ammunition he had without arguing or retreating. Then he simply looked at David and said, "David, I'm really proud of everything you've done." And David concludes this story, saying, "And I remember looking at my dad, and I thought I had sort of expected to argue, you know, not to win, but to come to some kind of armistice, some kind of truth truce. I hadn't expected to lose completely. But you can't because you can't argue with decency. You can't argue with goodness."

Now let's consider that promise: "They shall inherit the earth." First of all, it is interesting to note that Bible scholars say that this Beatitude was actually taken from Psalm 37, which is a wisdom psalm that addressed life's iniquities—evil doers

prospering while God's people don't. In verses nine, ten, and eleven of the Psalm, there's a promise to the meek that God is in control of the situation. "Those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land." It says, "In just a little while, the wicked will be no more, but the meek shall inherit the earth." Now, in the Greek version of the Old Testament, that last line is pretty much word for word with what Jesus said. It's also interesting that the psalmist described what the meek are to be living like, looking like, and being before the Lord. He says, "Commit your ways to the Lord. Trust in him, and he will act. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Fret not yourself over him who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices. Refrain from anger and forsake wrath. Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil."

So this psalm is telling us that being meek before the Lord is about trusting God in all things, committing one's way to the Lord in the confidence that he'll use his power and mercy to do good for us and through us. Meekness is waiting patiently and quietly, trusting in God with the outcome. Meekness is not giving way to anger and wrath towards others or constant envious fretting, which only leads to evil on our part. It's not punching back or insulting back or retaliating. It's trusting wholly in God to eventually vindicate his own people. The Psalmist sounds just like Jesus and Paul and James, doesn't he? "Blessed are the meek. They shall inherit the earth."

When? Well, then the Old Testament Psalm was referring to the actual land that Israel of old was promised that they would receive their due—the land that God had promised. In this beatitude, though, Jesus is dusting off that ancient promise and transforming it for his own purposes. First of all, when Jesus talks about "they shall inherit the earth," he's talking about the ultimate future, the end of time, when he returns in his glory and majesty and all things will be made right. And with his return, there will be a new Heaven and a new Earth, and guess who will inherit it all? Those who trust in Christ.

I am reminded of a statement Paul made to the Corinthian Christians who were bickering with one another over the question, "Who's the most well-off, wise, and truly authentic Christian? Those who were brought to Christ by Paul or those led to Christ by Apollos?" Paul admonishes them to knock it off, quarreling amongst themselves, fretting over this in regard to their new life in Christ, because it was by God's grace alone that they had it and the Holy Spirit working in them. He and Apollos were just the planter and the water, but it was God who brought about their salvation and

spiritual growth. So they were equals in Christ. These Corinthians, and Paul concludes with this truth for every believer: "So let no one boast in men, for all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future. All are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's." And later on, he'll remind them they've been made very rich in Christ, rich in forgiveness, rich in fellowship with fellow believers, rich in real-life purpose, rich in living the abundant life with God who faithfully provides for them along the way.

One last thought to consider as we think about "Inherit the Earth." This is good news for the Church of Christ to consider. When Pontius Pilate rode into Jerusalem to take up residence in the Antonia Fortress during the Passover time, he rode in on a war horse surrounded by soldiers. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem at Passover, though, he rode a donkey in a deliberate act of meekness and as a prophetic rejection of the militaristic means of empires. Of course, by the time the week was over, Jesus had been crucified by Pilate. But who did God vindicate? Whose empire still endures? Whose empire now stretches from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth? The empire of Rome that maintained its security by its military might has been swept into the dustbin of history like empire after empire, like strongman after strongman, while the Kingdom of God endures and continues to grow around the world, capturing people's hearts, changing lives every day with the Gospel of Jesus. And it shall prevail, for his is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever.

At this point, perhaps you're wondering, "So how does meekness come about and develop in a Christian's life? How does one cultivate it?" And if you're a disciple of Jesus sitting at his feet this morning, trusting and committing your way to him and waiting patiently for him, then let me assure you, God has already begun to make you meek, and He will continue to help you grow in that meekness.

You see, this is not something you do on your own. Only God can bring it about in a person. Meekness, as we've described it, goes against all that we are by our sinful nature. So it requires supernatural help, and the good news is that help is available through Jesus and the working of the Spirit. It's interesting to note that meekness is actually listed as the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians. As you study God's Word and seek him in prayer, asking him to grow that spiritual quality in you and keep yourself in fellowship with fellow believers through worship, Bible study, and service, the Holy Spirit uses those means to shape and mold you, conforming you into the image of Jesus

himself, meek and lowly. And you will be blessed and a blessing to those who encounter you. Blessed are the meek—the God-controlled, the God-trusting, exercising humble, patient, gentle, Christlike love towards all people—for they shall inherit the earth. That's our good news for today. Amen.

Let's pray. Father, we ask today that you would grow us in Christlike meekness. Soften our hearts. Remind us of the value of gentleness. Show us through Jesus how to love others. Help us to guard our thoughts and speech so that our words and conduct would be life-giving to others and glorifying to you. Amen.