

The Be-Attitudes: 3. Meekness
Matthew 5.1-12 [New Century Version]
Mason United Methodist Church
25 April 2010

This week my sister sent me a photo of a sign posted on a church in the United Kingdom that read: *The meek shall inherit the earth! (If it's all right with you.)*

The whole idea of meekness has been a bit of a turnoff for some folks who have read about it in the Bible or heard it used as a description of *gentle Jesus meek and mild*. Then it appears here in The Sermon on the Mount to declare that those who are *meek* shall inherit the earth. What's the message of this preacher?

The character qualities of Jesus must have been such that when he went to the pier to call his first disciples out of a group of professional fishermen they responded immediately and followed him at his request. Jesus must have not appeared as a *milquetoast* to them.

William Barclay [The Daily Study Bible, Edinburgh, Scotland: Saint Andrew Press 1956] writes that in our modern English idiom the word *meek* is hardly one of the honorable words of life. Nowadays it carries with it an idea of spinelessness, and subservience. It paints the picture of a submissive and ineffective creature (Vol. 1 page 91). In our modern vernacular the word often used to describe such character qualities in a person is *milquetoast*.

But it so happens that the word meek – in Greek *praus* – was one of the great Greek ethical words. [Ibid.]

Aristotle has a great deal to say about the quality of meekness (*praotēs*). It was Aristotle's fixed method to define every virtue as the mean between two extremes. On the one hand there was the extreme of excess; on the other hand there was the extreme of defect; and in between was the virtue itself, the happy medium. [Ibid.]

This method of thinking was popularized by the 17th century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). Although he never used the terms himself, the triad **thesis, antithesis, synthesis** is often used to describe his philosophy of thought [Wikipedia]. The triad is usually described in the following way:

- The thesis is an intellectual proposition.
- The antithesis is simply the negation of the thesis, a reaction to the proposition.
- The synthesis solves the conflict between the thesis and antithesis by reconciling their common truths, and forming a new proposition.

Similarly, Aristotle defines meekness, *praotēs* as the mean between *orgilotēs*, which means excessive anger, and *aorgēsia*, which means excessive angerlessness. [Op. Cit.]

Praotēs, meekness, as Aristotle saw it, is the happy medium between too much and too little anger. [Op. Cit.]

If we ask what the right time and the wrong time are, we may say as a general rule for life that it is never right to be angry for any insult or injury done to ourselves (says Barclay); that it is something that no Christian must ever resent; but that it is often right to be angry at injuries done to other people. Selfish anger is always a sin; selfless anger can be one of the great moral dynamics of the world. [Op. Cit.]

As human beings we have certain expectations of ourselves *and* of other persons. Those expectations are sometimes honorable; but most often they are not and can often get out of control and lead to problems. A dear friend of mine said something to me once that has left a permanent imprint on my mind – “*Expectations* are a down payment on *resentments*.”

So, is it all right to get angry? Did Jesus ever get angry? Oh, yes.

- Jesus had been telling his disciples what was ahead, that he would suffer at the hands of the religious leaders and be killed, and he would be raised again on the third day. Peter heard this and took Jesus aside saying, “Heaven forbid, Lord. This will never happen to you! Don’t talk like that!” It was at that moment that Jesus spun toward Peter and said, “Get away from me, Satan. You are a dangerous trap to me!” [Matthew 16.22-23]
- While in the synagogue area, Jesus noticed a man with a deformed hand. It was the Sabbath, and Jesus’ enemies were watching him closely. Would he heal the man’s hand on the Sabbath? If he did they planned to condemn him. Knowing what was going on, Jesus spoke to the man and said, “Come here and stand where everyone can see you.” Then he turned to his critics and asked, “Is it legal to do good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing harm? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?” When no one dared answer him, Jesus looked around at the crowd *angrily* [New Living Translation], because he was deeply disturbed by their hard hearts. Then he said to the man, “Give me your hand.” The man reached out his hand and it became normal again! And the scripture says, “At once the Pharisees went away and met with the supporters of Herod to discuss plans for killing Jesus.” [Mark 3.1-6]
- It was time for the annual Passover celebration and Jesus went to Jerusalem. In the Temple area he saw merchants selling cattle, sheep and doves for sacrifices; and he saw moneychangers behind their counters. He made a whip from some ropes and chased them all out of the Temple. Then he drove out the sheep and the oxen, flipped over the tables and scattered the money changers’ coins all over the floor, and turned over their tables. Then, going over to the people who sold doves, he told them, “Get these things out of here. Don’t turn my Father’s house into a

marketplace!” It was then that his disciples remembered a prophecy from the Scriptures (Psalm 69.9), “Passion for your house burns within me [*and will be my undoing* NLT], so those who insult you are also insulting me.” [John 2.13-17]

Was that righteous anger? Righteous indignation? I think Jesus had a case for his words and actions.

The word *mEEK* (πραυ) had a second standard Greek usage. It is the regular word for an animal which has been domesticated, which has been trained to obey the word of command, which has learned to answer to the reins. It is the word for an animal which has learned to accept control. So the second possible translation of this beatitude is: Blessed is the [person] who has every instinct, every impulse, every passion under control. Blessed is the [person] who is entirely self-controlled. [Barclay, Op. Cit., page 92]

Barclay says there is still a third possible side from which we may approach this beatitude. The Greeks always contrasted the quality which they called *πραοτῆς*, and which the Authorised Version translates meekness, with the quality which they called *ἠυψηλόκαρδια*, which means lofty-heartedness. In *πραοτῆς* there is the true humility which banishes all pride. *πραοτῆς* describes the humility, the acceptance of the necessity to be forgiven. It describes [a person’s] only possible attitude to God. [Ibid]

Meekness. Gentleness. Humility. Self-control. These are key words in the Be-Attitudes, and refer not so much to an attitude toward people as to a disposition before God.

In my recent spate of preaching *series sermons*, my wife told me that one of my predecessors at Mason Church (and the original designer of my office complex), the Rev. David Braun, once preached a series of twelve sermons based on the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Some of you here today may remember that series from a few decades ago. In researching some of the literature of this twelve-step program with regard to *self-control* I came across the following in one of AA’s textbooks entitled Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions [Alcoholics Anonymous World Services: New York, 1952]. The comments here are apropos for *anyone*, alcoholic or not.

Few people have been more victimized by resentments than have we alcoholics. It mattered little whether our resentments were justified or not. A burst of temper could spoil a day, and a well-nursed grudge could make us miserably ineffective. Nor were we ever skillful in separating justified from unjustified anger. As we saw it, our wrath was always justified. Anger, that occasional luxury of more balanced people, could keep us on an emotional jag indefinitely. These emotional “dry benders” often led straight to the bottle. Other kinds of disturbances – jealousy, envy, self-pity, or hurt pride – did the same thing.

A spot-check inventory taken in the midst of such disturbances can be of very great help in quieting stormy emotions. Today’s spot check finds its chief application to situations which arise in each day’s march. The consideration of

long-standing difficulties had better be postponed, when possible, to times deliberately set aside for that purpose. The quick inventory is aimed at our daily ups and downs, especially those where people or new events throw us off balance and tempt us to make mistakes.

Our first objective will be the development of self-restraint. This carries a top priority rating. When we speak or act hastily or rashly, the ability to be fair-minded and tolerant evaporates on the spot. One unkind tirade or one willful snap judgment can ruin our relation with another person for a whole day, or maybe a whole year [or maybe a lifetime]. Nothing pays off like restraint of tongue and pen. We must avoid quick-tempered criticism and furious, power-driven argument. The same goes for sulking and silent scorn. These are emotional booby traps baited with pride and vengefulness. Our first job is to sidestep the traps. When we are tempted by the bait, we should train ourselves to step back and think. For we can neither think nor act to good purpose until the habit of self-restraint has become automatic. [Pages 90-91]

One pastor I knew was the epitome of gentleness, meekness and spiritual strength. His wife told me of an incident that made me laugh as well as think about several times since. It was her description of one time when she didn't bow her head and close her eyes to pray.

Sitting at a green light waiting for a left turn across extremely busy traffic, she and her husband heard the angry person behind them blowing his horn incessantly for them to get a move on. Finally after the third appearance of a red light with no turn the angry man in the car behind opened his car door, stomped up to the minister's car, yanked open the pastor's car door and said, "Okay, get out! Let's fight!" To which the pastor mildly replied, "No, let's pray" and dropped his head and began to pray a prayer for the angry man and the stressful traffic situation that was upsetting him.

At the end of the prayer the man backed away from the car and in a mild-mannered voice said, "Oh, I'm so sorry" and went back to his own vehicle. I still smile when I remember that story, visualizing this man I knew so well praying while his wife watched the angry man carefully (and probably quite nervously concerned).

Milquetoast? Hardly. Spiritual strength and self-control? Absolutely. Meekness? A fine example.

From the notes in the margin of the Bible of my sister, Evangeline.

Meekness...means the whole earth will belong to those who are gentle and lowly. Not a doormat; but displaying gentleness and humbleness. The Message reads that "You're blessed when you're content with just who you are...no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought. You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat."