

“THE TERRIBLE MEEK”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Mt. 5:5

When one climbs a ladder he places a foot first on one rung, and then the next, moving up the ladder rung by rung until he reaches the level at which he is aiming, and then he gets busy doing whatever it was that caused him to climb the ladder in the first place.

The beatitudes are something like a ladder. They are arranged in a series of rungs, one leading to the next, each lifting us one level closer to our goal which is happiness -- here and now. Actually, our real goal is to get where we forget about being happy and are free from excessive preoccupation with ourselves so we can get busy doing what we have been placed on earth to do.

The first rung on this ladder is humility, or a sense of spiritual poverty.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .”

That is, the man who realizes that in, of, and by himself, he can in no way, or at anytime, enter the Kingdom of Heaven on his own. Without God, and God’s help in his life, he is licked. The poor in spirit are those who have faced up to their pride and called it by its real name: sin.

The second rung is mourning, or a genuine sense of sorrow for the spiritual poverty of sin.

“Blessed are they that mourn . . .”

It is one thing to realize you’re in trouble, it’s another thing to realize that *God* didn’t put you there! You got there all by yourself, and it’s up to you to decide to get out of the miry clay by repenting, turning away from sin, and walking in the opposite direction.

The third rung is meekness, and follows logically after its predecessors as spring follows winter and night follows day. After recognizing ones spiritual poverty, that is, his sin, and repenting of it, he becomes meek. He attains a frame of mind where he is teachable. Where he can be helped. In other words, he’s climbed the first two rungs of the ladder, and now, on his own, he must face

up to his sin and repent of it. After he has done that, he’s done everything he *can* do, God gets in the act, and begins to help him strengthen that decision.

As I said last Sunday, when we discuss the beatitudes, we are amazed at the difference between them and our popular notions about life. As someone has observed,

“We are so unaccustomed to spiritual truths, they just don’t sound right to our earthy ears. To the average person, the key to happiness lies in riches and possessions.”

But Jesus says that, to the contrary, the absence or presence of *things* doesn’t have anything to do with happiness. Nor, can we be happy through a hot pursuit of pleasure. Jesus says that the mourners are to be congratulated, for it is they, not the pleasure-seekers or escapist, who find true and lasting satisfaction.

And now, for yet a third time, our earth-bound concepts of happiness are upset.

“Blessed are the meek, for *they* shall inherit the earth.”

To our utter surprise, those who seem to be hopelessly out of the running, completely out of luck, thoroughly unworthy of receiving accommodation of anyone for anything are the ones who end up happy. Instead of the radiant, effervescent spell-binders who bowl over any and all opposition, who overwhelm others, it is the meek who inherit the earth.

Ralph W. Sockman says it’s hard for us in this era of power to appreciate this teaching. We live and move and have our beings in an atmosphere of ever increasing, evermore dominating p-o-w-e-r!

“We measure our machines by their horsepower. We measure our men by their money-power. We measure our nations by their military power. And, when we turn in this high-powered age to talk about the power of God as showing itself best in the restraint which would not break a bruised reed, it just doesn’t make sense to us. And yet the scripture stands, ‘Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.’”

It is interesting to me that none of the many resources to which I turned for insight into this scripture can explain where and how meekness got its bad name. Maybe it's because we just don't understand what meekness is. But most folks are agreed that meekness is not the stuff of which heroes are made. In fact, we look upon it as “the vice of a spiritual doormat, rather than the virtue of a spiritual aristocrat.” And since no one, least of all red blooded he-men, want to be thought of as feeble, frail, fragile and effeminate, we tend to pass over the idea of meekness as not being of much value.

Suppose, as one commentator suggests, a young fellow is out with his girl and they are attacked by a would be rapist. Will the girl admire meekness? Will she think, as her boyfriend lets himself get knocked out, leaving her in the hands of a criminal, “What a blessing it is to be engaged to a meek man?” In her peril she would much rather, I think, have her man dealing out explosive “whaps” and “bams” to the attacker, rather than be a Casper Milquetoast piously resigned to the worst. And yet, the scripture stands, “Happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

It's natural to ask, what on earth did Jesus *mean*? Maybe it will help if we look at the life of Jesus himself. He was not only the greatest teacher who ever lived, he, himself, was the greatest lesson he ever taught. If we want to know what meekness means, we ought to look at the One who was said to be “indescribably meek and lowly in heart.”

When we do, we discover that in Jesus the characteristic of meekness was anything but that of a whipped puppy. Or of a feeble, frail, effeminate man. Meekness in Jesus was not mere mild-manneredness. The meekness of Jesus was not that of a shy, cringing soul who scurries into a corner like a frightened mouse at the first suggestion of challenge. There was nothing soft, flabby, or insipid about Jesus. He was courageous, strong and virile. And to see meekness in our Lord, is to see meekness for what it really is, what someone calls “a special kind of effectiveness.”

When we take a long, hard look at the life of Jesus, we see that he had every facet of character in proper proportion to make a winsome person. He was courageous. He was upright. He was

wise. He was alert. He was loving. He was loyal. And, he was meek. Jesus had a unique combination of toughness and tenderness. And he never allowed these two characteristics to get out of balance.

In Mark 10:13, we read that Jesus was “moved with indignation” when the disciples tried to keep the children from coming to him.

In Mark 11:15, we are told that anger drove him “to cleanse the temple of those whose greed had profaned the house of prayer.”

In Matthew 18:6, we see the flashing sternness with which he condemns those “who cause children to stumble.”

And that same sternness is expressed in Matthew 16:23, when Jesus rebuked Peter for trying to tempt him away from the path of the cross.

Look at the life of Jesus and you’ll learn that meekness is the direct antithesis of weakness. Weakness is *yielding* to our human nature. Meekness is *mastering* our human nature. Meekness is the opposite of aggression and vindictiveness, for the meek man is concerned with his duties, while the weak man is concerned with his rights.

Bible commentators point out that there is no one English word which precisely expresses the Biblical idea behind the word translated, “meek.” About the best we can do is to describe it as “power blended with gentleness.” The Greeks used the word “*praos*,” which we have translated “meek,” to describe wild animals which have been trained. Or wild horses which have been brought into submission and, therefore, usefulness.

J. Wallace Hamilton in his wonderful book Ride the Wild Horses points out that there is nothing weak or spineless about the word. Instead, it speaks of power under strict control. The meek, Dr. Hamilton says, are “God-tamed people, and just as a wild horse is caught, haltered, and bridled so it becomes useful to its master, so, too, our wild nature must be tamed by God before we are of any practical or constructive use to him.”

Both Sockman and Hamilton suggest vivid images--

“The bull in a china shop smashing the beautiful objects of art has a certain kind of strength, the strength of a bull.”

“The bully in a crowd elbowing his way to the front and bowling over his weak brethren has a certain kind of strength, the strength of a bully.”

Sockman goes on to say that the strength of which Christ speaks here in this third beatitude is like the power which is produced when the Niagara River is harnessed and its wild, rushing flow is used to produce electricity. Or to use a figure suggested by Hamilton,

“It is like a Jujitsu expert who knows his own strength and therefore doesn’t have to prove anything to anybody. When he is threatened, he stands quietly and watchfully waits for a bull-like charge. And then, instead of destroying his adversary, he catches him and grips him in such a way that the adversary cannot storm or rage any longer, and in that moment, discovers he has met his master.”

Even so, the meek are those who know their own strength, which is actually God’s strength flowing in and through them, and thus are masters of life’s situations.

As one writer so descriptively puts it,

“The meek man knows how to choose the right weapon. He knows that blind pugnacity, arrogance, self-assertiveness, retaliation will not win in the long run. He knows that the gentleness of which Christ speaks, and of which he was the perfect example, will win. It has its roots in divine strength. A strength which overrides and overarches all the irritations of life.”

And, Jesus declares, the man who is meek in *that* sense --

Shall Inherit the Earth

It’s important that we note the word “*inherit*.” It speaks of a legacy, or gift, which comes to the meek because they have sense enough *not* to strive, strain or struggle for it.

Back in the 1940's I was invited by a friend to become sales manager for his rapidly expanding business. He had begun on a shoestring, and with bold and imaginative self-assertiveness had paraded that shoestring into a sales organization which was earning a net profit of three-hundred-thousand dollars a year. The job he offered me would have paid more than thirty-thousand dollars a year.

I hate to admit, but I was really tempted by this. I come from a poor family where we were often glad to have just the necessities of life. The thought of being able to afford some of the luxuries was quite appealing. In fact, I struggled with his offer for several weeks before deciding not to leave the ministry in which I was just beginning, and go into business as a Christian layman.

Oddly enough, it was this text, or better yet my friend's misinterpretation of this text, which helped me reach that decision. While I was discussing his offer with him, he described the bold, assertive, beady-eyed, hard-hitting nature of his approach to business. He said,

“You know, the Bible says ‘Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth,’ but don’t take that too seriously, the meek never get anywhere.”

When he said it, it sounded so true. And yet it also expressed an attitude that troubled me. It wasn't until months later, after I had decided not to accept his offer and he had run into serious trouble, that I began to understand what it was that troubled me. As I took a fresh look at what he had said, I was struck by the significance of that word, “inherit.”

“Blessed are the meek for they shall *inherit* the earth.”

For a time, the proud, the arrogant, the self-assertive seem to succeed, at least from the human point of view. But ultimately, the happiness for which they strive endlessly and unsuccessfully comes as a legacy, an inheritance, a *gift* to those that allow themselves to be tamed and trained by God. They *inherit* the earth.

One commentator suggests that this is illustrated by the dinosaurs which once terrorized our planet. Today they are extinct. Actually, they became the victims of their own ponderous power.

They literally blundered to their destruction, while the sheep, which the dinosaurs could have easily crushed, still graze on the hillsides long centuries after the dinosaurs are gone.

In much the same way, an aggressor is at odds with himself. He is divided within himself. His judgement becomes blind and he stumbles to his doom. While the person of “reverent lowliness,” as someone has described the meek, is integrated. Together. Undivided. His purposes and aims are clear. He is intent upon God. Surrendered to God. Controlled by God. And this divine-mastery produces self-mastery which results in daily-mastery over the circumstances and situations which he faces.

The person who is meek in the sense of being God-mastered and self-mastered has a winsome and winning way about him. He possesses what Milton called, “the invincible might of meekness.” And, *through* meekness he *inherits* a world of happiness which nothing can destroy. Why? Because he lives in such a way that nothing can really get *to* him, save the love of Christ and those things which Christ loves.

Ralph Sockman points out that the French have an interesting translation of this beatitude in their New Testament. They have it, “Happy are the debonair.” Dr. Sockman suggests that, at first glance, that word seems to be out of character with the idea of meekness, especially when we think of it in conjunction with Jesus. To us, the debonair are people who are gay, glib, carefree, and, to a certain extent, shallow. But, to quote Sockman,

“The Gaelic mind has a logic which cannot be easily dismissed. And, in this case, it points toward a wonderful truth. The meek man is completely God-oriented. His strength is disciplined into such gentleness he is one of God’s gentlemen, carrying his virtue with easy grace. He has the debonair attitude of one who has canceled out the false sadness we often link with ‘meekness’ and is so gladdened and overcome by God’s greatness, he counts his own life as nothing, gaily spending it in love for others.”

And *this* man is the man who knows what true happiness is! And, he knows it in the *here and now!* He knows that it comes through meekness. He knows that meekness is not a *devaluation* of one's self, but a true *evaluation* of one's self. He knows that true meekness has sinew, and is a far cry from the traditional idea of one who is sad and somber and self-defeating.

Meekness Does Not Come Naturally

It's nothing new to say it is *not* in our nature to be meek. On the contrary, it is in our nature to be proud and haughty. That's why the new birth is so essential for us. That's why Jesus very frankly, and pointedly said, not only to Nicodemus, but to *us*, “You *must* be born again.”

Meekness begins there. You *must* have a change of nature if you want to have happiness -- here and now. You must be born again. That's the first step.

If you have ever spent time studying folklore or mythology, you will find the same theme constantly reoccurring. One, the hero must make a long journey into darkness and difficulty. Two, he must slay the dragon or the serpent. Three, he must come through death to new life, or new birth.

Well, the Christian story takes that same theme and raises it to its highest form. The dragon must be slain. That is, sin must be conquered and we must pass from death to life, and that is precisely what Jesus makes possible! Through his life and death upon the cross Jesus has slain the dragon. He has marched through the darkness of night into the light of morning. And, he offers to us the possibility of a new-birth. A new *life* of freedom from arrogance and self-assertiveness. A new *life* of submission, obedience and joy!

All hymnology is not good theology, but there is no escaping the truth of that wonderful old gospel song, “Trust and Obey.”

“When we walk with the Lord
In the light of his word

What a glory he sheds on our way.
When we do his good will
He abides with us still
And with all who will trust and obey.
Trust and obey, for there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”

Happy are the meek. Happy are those who humble themselves before God. Who depend upon him. Who are God-tamed, God-trained, God-molded, and God-directed. They shall *inherit* the earth “after the proud (and the powerful) have killed themselves off trying to possess it.”