

Lesson 4

Blessed are the Humble

Learning how to exhibit meekness as the world runs the other way

Introduction

Imagine how shocking the first three beatitudes must have been to the typical listener that day as Jesus preached. Jesus' opening statements lay the foundational truth that a disciple never aggressively insists on his or her own rights but displays authentic humility. It is a complete reversal of the world's norm. Jesus' words did not match the widely held expectation associated with the Messiah, who was seen as a conqueror and ruler who would reestablish Jewish authority, prestige, and dominance. Many thought the Messiah would finally remove the Romans from Palestine and rule over the world, with the Jews being above the rest because they were the people of God. They looked forward to a time when the Messiah would come and deal harshly with their enemies and oppressors delivering them from their present situation.

So, when Jesus begins by stating that those who would be part of His kingdom would need to come broken hearted and with a crushed spirit, mourning for their sin, and now with a humble spirit, his words must have been so striking that most could not comprehend. What Jesus said completely defied their expectations. Some in the audience must have walked away. For those who stayed, their entire perspective would have been challenged. It is natural for us, in our fallen condition, to feel justified in doing things our way, to champion the defending of our rights, and serve our own ends. The type of spirit Jesus describes requires stripping all that away.

Humility was not a virtue in the Greco-Roman world. The word was often associated with failure and shame, referring to something that had been crushed or debased. In its place was the practice of seeking honor for one's accomplishments. Emperor Augustus (63BC – 14 AD) inscribed bronze tablets to be set up at his burial place, where a complete catalog of 35 areas of achievement and accomplishment was written by himself about himself. He lists military victories, public awards, gifts to the community provided at his own expense, and many other things so that all would know of the "honour that up to the present day has been decreed to no one besides myself" and that which had "been given me by the senate and the people of Rome on account of my courage, clemency, justice, and piety."¹² This type of self-congratulation was expected by world leaders and even ordinary citizens. It was very common for people to display their best accomplishments before others.

Even the Jews were not ashamed to draw attention to themselves. The great Jewish historian Josephus opens his autobiography with the type of self-congratulation that make most people today cringe:

¹² Dickson, John. "How Christian Humility Upended the World." *ABC Religion and Ethics*. October 27, 2011. Online. Retrieved December 22, 2021 at <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/how-christian-humility-upended-the-world/10101062>

I was myself brought up with my brother, whose name was Matthias, for he was my own brother, by both father and mother; and I made mighty proficiency in the improvements of my learning, and appeared to have both a great memory and understanding. (9) Moreover, when I was a child, and about fourteen years of age, I was commended by all for the love I had to learning; on which account the high priests and principal men of the city came then frequently to me together, in order to know my opinion about the accurate understanding of points of the law;¹³

Jesus' concepts of meekness and humility completely ran against the world. They still do. While our culture may pay lip service to humility . . . pride and vain glory are still in high demand. We see it in Hollywood, sports, the media, among politicians, everywhere. Advertisements fill our minds with what we deserve and accentuate our self-importance. It is an ever-present problem that is rooted in pride.

How can we fight back?

The Beatitude

Blessed are the humble, for they will inherit the earth, Matthew 5.5

To be “humble,” or “gentle,” is to be meek or considerate. One dictionary says it is *not being overly impressed by a sense of one's self-importance*.¹⁴ Another person describes it in how we deal with other people; the humble are “those who do not throw their weight about.”¹⁵ It is not to be confused with weakness. Meekness goes along with great strength and ability, but it is always inside a spirit of total dependence on God. It is the person who has brought himself under the control of God. In secular Greek, the word for *humble* was used to describe the taming of a wild animal.¹⁶

An unbroken colt is useless; medicine that is too strong will harm rather than cure; a wind out of control destroys. Emotion out of control also destroys, and has no place in God's kingdom. Meekness uses its resources appropriately.¹⁷

True meekness is really a display of the strong . . . someone who could assert themselves but choose not to do so.¹⁸ It is *power put under control*.¹⁹

What it is not

It is not just the act of being nice.

¹³ Life 2.8. “The Life of Flavius Josephus.” Josephus, Flavius, and William Whiston. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987, p. 1.

¹⁴ **πραῦς, πραεῖα, πραῦ**. Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

¹⁵ France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007, p. 166.

¹⁶ Hauck, Friedrich, and Seigfried Schulz. “Πραῦς, Πραῦτης.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–, Vol. 6, p. 644.

¹⁷ MacArthur, p. 171.

¹⁸ See Leon Morris who goes on to say that “self-assertion is never a Christian virtue; rather, it is Christian to be busy in lowly service and refuse to engage in the conduct that merely advances one's personal aims.” Morris, Leon. *The Gospel according to Matthew*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992, p. 98.

¹⁹ MacArthur, p. 171.

It is not weakness. It is the opposite of violence and vengeance. In fact, it is the display of the greatest type of strength through the resisting of our human tendencies.

It is not a lack of conviction. It is the deep abiding trust that God is true to His promises and that His principles are right.

How This Fits with the Two Previous Beatitudes

Let's put the third beatitude in progression with the two previous ones. Being *poor in spirit* means we squarely look at ourselves and are made humble by the reality of our own sinfulness. This breaks our heart and results in *mourning* for our transgressions before a righteous God. *Meekness* is where we turn our focus to God, empty ourselves of all self-reliance and depend on Him. Looking ahead to the next beatitude, it is our *meekness* that results in our *seeking righteousness*, Matthew 5.6.

Some have connected Matthew 5.5 with Psalm 37.7-9, 11. Those who are meek or humble (Psalm 37.11) will *inherit the land and will enjoy abundant prosperity*. They are told to *be silent before the Lord and wait expectantly for him* and not to *be agitated by one who prospers in his way*. In Hebrew the admonition is not to let your anger burn over how the wicked prosper. Instead, God's people are to place their trust in Him and believe in His promises. We wait on the Lord and refuse to fret to scheme on how to make right how we have been wronged.

Meekness in Action

The best way to understand meekness is to see how it is described in Scripture. Let's consider three examples:

Moses

Any lesson on meekness cannot go without mentioning Moses who is described as *a very humble man, more so than anyone on the face of the earth*, Numbers 12.3. We see his meekness and humble disposition exhibited in Exodus 4 when God asked him to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. We see it his refusal to respond to criticism regarding his leadership, Numbers 12.1-2. We see it in his willingness to adapt and delegate some of his responsibilities after being overwhelmed by being the leader of Israel, Exodus 18.13-24.

David

David was chosen as Saul's replacement as king because he was a man after God's own heart. In between the time Samuel anointed David and his actual installment on the throne however, was very difficult. Saul made David his personal enemy thus subjecting David to becoming an outlaw and fugitive. David survived several attempts on his life by the hands of Saul. One of the greatest examples of David's meekness is seen in 1 Samuel 24.1-6 where, out of respect for the office Saul occupied, he refused to kill the king. He even regretted cutting off the fringe of Saul's robe. This is a great example of strength under control. David was content to allow God to be in control.

Paul

In Philippians 3 Paul recounts his Jewish education. By human standards, he had every right to flaunt his background in Judaism. He was a Pharisee, and *blameless* regarding the Law. Yet, he says he counted it all to be loss in view of knowing Jesus Christ, Philippians 3.3-8. He walked away from his own acts of righteousness and boasted in the saving work of Jesus, 3.9-11.

Jesus

There are several examples we could draw off Jesus' exhibiting meekness, the greatest example being His trial and crucifixion. There is another episode we should focus on in Matthew 12.15-21 where Jesus withdraws from confrontation. The first 14 verses of the chapter detail Jesus' and the disciples plucking grain to eat on the Sabbath. This begins a confrontation over whether healing was allowed on the Sabbath, to which Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. After this happens, we are told, *the Pharisees went out and plotted against him, how they might kill him*, 12.14.

The next verse, I believe, exhibits the great meekness of Christ. Instead of continuing to make His point that He was the Lord of the Sabbath (12.8), he displays a gentle, non-confrontational attitude. Instead, He moves with great patience and serves humankind from the perspective of encouragement, rather than denunciation. Greater confrontations would come as His ministry progressed, but they would not be caused by Him.

Meekness does not look for confrontation ... it seeks peace and the building up of others. It takes the long-term goal in view.

The Reward for the Meek

As we seek to understand, it is important to remember the Jewish context. For centuries they had been oppressed and brutalized. 175 years before Jesus the Maccabean revolt came about because of the evil practices of the Seleucid dynasty. The Jews enjoyed a short period of basic independence afterward, but by the coming of the Romans in the century before Jesus all semblance of the Jews possessing an autonomous nation had vanished. The Romans were extreme in the way they controlled the Jews. Pilate is a great example:

He was cruel by nature...entirely lacking in remorse." The Judea of his day was marked by "bribes...robbery, oppression, humiliations, men often sent to death untried, and incessant...unmitigated cruelty." The moment he became Procurator he showed how he despised the Jews and their religious laws....

Were we to count...those who fell in the wars...rebellions...those murdered by Herod and the Procurators during this dreadful century...total of not less than 200,000 men—an appalling number for such a comparatively small country.... Every country...fallen under Rome's iron yoke groaned under the harsh bondage; but none felt it so bitterly as did the Jews.... Other conquered peoples...Rome...was tolerant in...beliefs and ideas. But the

Jews no more understood...the Romans than did the Romans understand...those Jews...rising in solid revolt over what, to the Romans, seemed matters of the most trivial importance.²⁰

Maybe we can begin to see the intense hunger from the Jewish population to be delivered from the Romans. And perhaps we can begin to see the abject disappointment some may have had when He taught that His great kingdom had nothing to do with this world and everything with the world to come. To them, the evil only gained while the people of God suffered. But for those who endeavored to understand, the promise of overcoming was there. The child of God must come to understand their responsibility to trust God and follow through. Judgment will come, all accounts will be settled, and the will of God will be accomplished. In the meantime, we are simply to called upon to move in confidence that our inheritance will come.

Some want to tie in the application of Matthew 5.5b to a literal inheritance of physical land. But, if the first two beatitudes apply to the kingdom of heaven, then the same should apply to the inheritance Jesus promises. The focus here more about the plight of God's people being reversed rather than on a specific inheritance.²²

Meekness is Not Optional

It is commanded. *Seek the Lord, all you humble of the earth, who carry out what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be concealed on the day of the Lord's anger,* Zephaniah 2.3. In the New Testament we read: *Therefore, ridding yourselves of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save your souls,* James 1.21.

You will not be saved without it. *For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation,* Psalm 149.4. *"Truly I tell you," he said, "unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven,"* Matthew 18.2-4.

You cannot share your faith effectively without it. *In your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do this with gentleness and reverence, ...* 1 Peter 3.15-16a. Pride will hamper your effectiveness and damage your influence.

²⁰ This is a quote by Agrippa I about Pilate found in Philo of Alexandria's writing. See "Why Roman Oppression was Harder on Jews Than Other Nations." July 7, 2018. Online. Retrieved December 22, 2021 at <http://www.envisionbibleworld.com/2018/07/roman-oppression-harder-jews-other-nations/>

²¹ In another writing, Philo describes Pilate as "a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate." He was the Jews might try to have him impeached "with respect to other particulars of his government, in respect of his corruption, and his acts of insolence, and his rapine, and his habit of insulting people, and his cruelty, and his continual murders of people untried and uncondemned, and his never ending, and gratuitous, and most grievous inhumanity." Yonge, Charles Duke with Philo of Alexandria. *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995, p. 784.

²² France, p. 166.