

## “BLESSED ARE THE MEEK”

Life on the Vine – Gentleness

Matthew 5:3-5 (p. 936)

Galatians 5:19-23 (p. 1132)

*Inspiring committed Christians to grow in the wisdom of God’s word, and to become living examples of Christ’s love for the world.* That is our mission here at Westminster. And if you want a standard by which to measure how faithfully we’re going about our work, you need look no further than our lesson from Galatians 5. There Paul lists for us the so-called “fruit of the Spirit” – those qualities that are characteristic of a healthy, Spirit-led church.

Today we’re looking at what is, for some people, one of the more controversial aspects of the fruit of the Spirit. Some translations, like the NIV, render the term as “gentleness.” Others will translate the same word as “meekness.” At other places in the Bible you’ll find that same word rendered as “humility.” But all three – gentleness, meekness and humility – are part of this particular aspect of life in the Spirit which Paul denotes by the one Greek word, *praótes*.

I say that this might be one of the more controversial aspects of the Christian life because these days there is a good deal of emphasis placed on self-improvement and self-assertiveness. Ideas such as these stand in rather stark contrast to what I suspect is a common misunderstanding of meekness and gentleness, even among Christians. Now, one can hardly argue with the idea of self-improvement or even self-assertiveness. The problem, it seems to me, is that, given our fallen human nature, we will often end up placing an inordinate amount of importance on the “self” part of self-improvement or self-assertiveness. When that happens, they become selfish-improvement and selfish-assertiveness. And selfishness, I’d suggest, is fundamentally at odds with the true meaning of meekness, gentleness, humility. Now, in contrast to popular selfishness, our Lord made this remarkable assertion. He said, “*Blesses are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*”

Today I want to address two questions. First: What does the Bible mean by “meekness” or “gentleness?” Second: How does that virtue play itself out in our Christian lives? There is, as I said, a common misunderstanding of meekness. In fact you will often hear people speak of meekness as though it were little more than a spineless, passive form of self-deprecation. So you may be surprised to learn that not only the Bible, but classic Greek philosophy holds a rather high view of *praótes*. So before we go any further, let’s define our terms.

**1. What do we mean by “meekness?”** To answer that, let’s first look at Aristotle’s definition. Aristotle defined a virtue as “the mean between two extremes.” Virtue, he said, is to be found somewhere between two vices. For example, at one end of the scale is the vice of greed. At the other end is the vice of extravagance. But between miserliness and lavishness, between the two extremes of stinginess and prodigality, you find the virtue of generosity – the capacity to find joy in having and joy in giving away.

**a.** In the same way, at one end of the spectrum is the problem we call rage. At the other extreme we find the equally distressing problem of indifference. But between the vices of excessive anger and utter passivity, we have the virtue Aristotle identifies as *praótes* (gentleness, meekness, humility). Somewhere between those extremes, we will find the grace to respond to all sorts of trying situations with balance and integrity, without either blowing up or giving up. I suspect Aristotle’s definition can be helpful in giving us a more reasoned and useful idea of what Paul was getting at in speaking of *praótes* as a fruit of the Spirit.

**b.** But there’s more. In the Old Testament you will find a fascinating description of the Hebrew equivalent of *praótes*. In Numbers 12 we find Miriam and Aaron upset because Moses had married a Cushite, a woman from east Africa. Evidently her skin was a little too dark for their tastes. But rather than speaking honestly to Moses about their problem, they grumbled. And this is what they said: “*Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?*” In other words, “*Who does he think he is? He thinks he can do anything he wants!*” But Moses kept his cool.

The Lord God overheard Miriam and Aaron grumbling and he said to them, in so many words, “*I normally address my prophets through visions and dreams. But when I speak to my man, Moses, we talk face to face. How dare you mouth off like that about my servant!*” (I’ll leave it to you to discover God’s curiously ironic sense of justice in dealing with Miriam’s apparent aversion to people of color.)

But what I want you to notice is the parenthetical comment in verse 3 of Numbers 12. It says, “*Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.*” Isn’t that interesting? This remarkable man who stood up to Pharaoh, who split the Red Sea and who put up with the grouching and whining of all those Israelites for forty years in the most inhospitable circumstances and still kept his cool – this amazingly strong leader is identified here as being “more humble than anyone else on earth.”

So, what do we learn about true humility from Moses? On the one hand, when he was maligned by those two, he didn’t react arrogantly or belligerently. He kept quiet and let them blow off steam. Yet he was hardly indifferent to them. In fact, when he saw Miriam’s misery, it says in verse 13 that he cried out to the Lord, “*O God, please heal her!*” This humble man brought his accuser’s misery

to the throne of grace and said to God, *“Please, Lord! This woman has suffered enough.”* That, folks, is true humility. When someone bad-mouths you, is that how you would treat them?

*c.* Or look at the superlative example of our Lord. In Matthew 21 we find that Jesus’ popularity had reached its peak. If ever there was a time, in human terms, that Jesus should have capitalized on his tremendous popular appeal, it was on that first Palm Sunday. But rather than relying on the opinion polls to dictate how he should consolidate his power, Jesus chose to make his grand entrance into the city of Jerusalem riding on a donkey (and an undersized one at that).

The prophet Zechariah anticipated that remarkable day in saying: *“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”* There is the virtue of meekness, gentleness, humility. It is neither showing off and insisting on your rights, nor is it pretending that you have no rights. Meekness is eloquently understating your position and allowing your own sense of personal worth to speak for itself.

**2. *Now, how does that virtue work itself out in our everyday lives as Christians?*** It means that, in following the example of our Lord, we are not to be passively indifferent, acting as if you and I have no rights. But neither are we to belligerently insist on our own rights. True meekness is being quite aware of your own great worth, being fully cognizant of your rights, yet making the deliberate decision not to insist on having things your way – even when you deserve to have things your way. That takes a remarkable amount of inner strength – especially in a society that seems to put a premium on looking out for Number One.

*a.* So let’s consider, for example, how *praótes* is expressed in terms of a Christian’s manners. Ask yourself this: How do you receive the Word of God? How do you handle it when someone confronts you with a convicting word from Scripture? The Apostle James suggests this strategy: *“Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”*

Some people hear God’s word of truth with what could only be described as indifference. They may hear it, but it rolls like proverbial water off a duck’s back. Others are just the opposite. They get all upset and angry when someone tries to share Scripture with them. Of course it’s rather difficult to get angry at a book. And so they become hostile toward those who represent the Word to them. James says that we are to be neither indifferent nor defensive, but humbly accept God’s Word, because it can save you!

Christian manners apply not only to how we receive God’s Word, but also to how we share it. Again, there are those who are quite passive when it comes to the business of sharing their faith. They never say anything about the fact that they’re

Christians. To them, being a Christian is a kind of secret service. On the other hand you have those who can't seem to wait for another opportunity to attack someone with the Bible. Sometimes you'll see them in the supermarket. They'll have some poor soul pinned up against the cabbages, nose-to-nose, crying, "*Are you aware of the Four Spiritual Laws?*" It's not a pretty sight.

What does the Apostle Peter say? He writes: "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...*" In other words, when it comes to evangelizing, don't be spineless, wishy-washy kind of evan-jellyfish. But neither should you attack people with a kind of in-your-face witnessing that antagonizes them to the point that they can't hear the Good News you're trying so hard to convey.

**b.** Or consider how *praótes* expresses itself in a Christian's family relationships. In Ephesians 5:21, the Apostle Paul sets the standard for humility in Christian marriage. He says: "*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives to your husbands...*" and "*Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*" In other words, in a Christian marriage neither spouse is afforded the option of being a passive-receptive doormat. But neither are they allowed to run roughshod over the other, insisting on their own way.

In mutual submission, out of reverence for Christ, husbands and wives are to live out a relationship that mirrors the relationship between the Church who loves and respects her Lord, and the Lord who loves the Church to the extent of giving his life to save her. There is a profound tenderness implicit in Christian marriage. But to sustain that tenderness, it requires a kind of spiritual toughness that will not give in to the temptation either to become indifferent or to become domineering and manipulative. In short, God calls for a mutual gentleness of spirit.

That same gentleness applies to the relationship between Christian parents and their children. After calling for gentleness in the marriage relationship, Paul goes on to say: "*Do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*"

**c.** And *praótes*, that same spirit of gentleness, applies not only to our Christian manners and family relationships, but to how we are to treat those in the church, the community of faith. When a brother or sister in Christ commits what is clearly a sin, we have a responsibility to call that sin by its proper name. We can't deny that responsibility. But we can rebuke a brother or sister without rancor or abusive language.

The church in Corinth was beginning to show signs of serious degeneration. There was growing jealousy, quarreling, factions, sexual misconduct, and arrogance. So Paul wrote to them and told them he was coming there to deal with

the situation. But he gave them a choice. He asked them: “*What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a spirit of gentleness?*” That is, “*I can’t be indifferent to you. I love you too much. And I certainly don’t want to come down hard on you. I want to be able to help you set things right. But you need to cooperate. So, what will it be?*” That is gentle rebuke.

And when we are called to restore a brother or sister in Christ, we must do it with a spirit of gentleness. In fact, that’s exactly what Paul says following his list of the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 6 he writes: “*If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.*” When it falls to you to restore someone who has strayed, be sure you do it with an attitude that says, “*There but for the grace of God go I.*” Because more often than we may wish to admit, that’s exactly how it is.

Well, that’s a tall order. We are to exhibit a gentleness of spirit, a meekness, a humility that refuses to give up or give in, but that also will not explode. In short, in our manners, in our marriages and families, and in our ministries, we are to discipline ourselves.

I use the word discipline because, as you may know, that same Greek word, *praótes*, which means “meekness,” also applies to animals that have been tamed – for example, the wild horse that has learned to answer to the reins. Anyone who has ever sat astride a half ton of newly tamed horseflesh knows that they are not dealing with weakness in any sense. They know they’re straddling great strength that is presently under control. And that strength-under-control is the gentleness, the meekness to which Jesus referred when he said, “*Blessed are the meek (the God-disciplined) for they will inherit the earth.*” The question you and I need to address is this: Under whose control am I? Paul says that among the fruit of the Spirit-controlled life is meekness, gentleness, humility.

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