

The Fellowship of the Meek

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[0 : 00] Matthew's Gospel, chapter 5, and our text this evening is found at verse 4. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. I was listening a few nights ago to Andrew Marr, the TV presenter, who was hosting a programme about great works of art.

And he was talking for the whole programme about that famous painting of Leonardo da Vinci, the Mona Lisa. And as he was standing beside that painting, he was saying, this great, famous and single portrait is a portrait that has so many aspects and facets to it.

He said, for instance, it's got the geometrical lines in the painting. And then he says, there's tremendous technical ability in the way that the painter has made each eye slightly different, at a slightly different angle.

And he said, then there's the smile and there's the gaze. This single portrait, there are so many aspects to it. He said, when you're standing beside it, it's almost like it's living, it's alive.

[1 : 40] And he said, it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. And he also said, fundamentally, this portrait, this painting of the Mona Lisa, isn't a portrait of one particular person.

It is a picture of the whole of humanity. And I'm hoping that as we go through those Beatitudes, as I've said before, they're a single portrait.

We have eight different aspects of this great portrait. And there's a sense in which I would say, slightly altering Andrew Marr's comments, that this is both a portrait of one particular person, all of the Beatitudes together, namely Jesus Christ.

But it's also a picture of the people of God, the disciples and the followers of Jesus. And as we look at this Beatitude, we're going to look at it under three headings.

The pattern of meekness, the power of meekness and the promise of meekness. Firstly, then, the pattern of meekness.

[2 : 58] And in using this title, I'm really exploring the meaning of meekness. And I'm sure you'll agree with me that the word meek isn't a common word in use.

You don't see it in any person's specification in a job application forum. And you don't really hear anyone in general conversation saying, hey, look at that cool girl or that cool boy.

Even in Christian culture, how often do we hear this word meek? We hear other words, don't we, like forgiveness, faith, love, guilt, hope, atonement, justification, but meek.

Probably in the minds of most people today and in the past, if they've ever heard of the word, they associate it with someone who's soft, spineless, grovingly submissive.

Even the words of the Wesleyan hymn, Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild, have been viewed on occasion with considerable reservation by right-wing orthodoxy.

[4 : 06] And of course, the German philosopher Nietzsche, not only this virtue and this quality, that he regarded all Christian virtues that had underpinned Western civilization to be the very thing that was keeping humankind back, holding them down.

These groveling, submissive, obedient, subservient virtues, as he called it. And he dreamt and hoped for an Übermensch, a German word for a new man or a superman.

A new kind of human being that would shake off the shackles of these Christian virtues that underpinned Western civilization. And so, in the mind of so many people, the word meek has a negative connotation.

Now, is Nietzsche and this popular culture right? Let's look at the Bible and find out what the Bible says about the meaning of this word meek. Well, in the Old Testament and in the Hebrew, what we find is we do a real contextual study of this word, that it's often used in the context of sociological and political powerlessness.

And it stands alongside, often in verses, with the poor. As you know, Hebrew poetry is based on parallelism.

[5 : 42] And often you get one half of the parallel, one bit of the parallel saying meek, and another saying the poor. So there's a close association there.

And not only is it, of course, sociological and political, but it's also spiritual. But a lot of the context has this political and sociological context.

But when the meek are mentioned in the Old Testament, even in that context, they're mentioned as those that have a sense of God and a sense of their need.

When we move to the Greek, the word in the Greek language is, by the way, is the same word in non-biblical Greek as it is in biblical Greek.

And it has a more unethical and moral value. And here I think, especially because it's the same word in non-biblical and biblical Greek, that Aristotle can help us.

[6 : 44] The great Aristotle regarded meekness as one of the virtues. And he had a method of defining virtue, which you might call the happy medium of two extremes.

For example, Aristotle, you might think, well, there's such a thing as a spendthrift, and then there's a miser. But the middle ground here, the happy medium is a general person, neither someone who hoards their wealth or someone who spends it all for themselves.

And that was his method of defining virtue. And he believed that meekness, in fact, was related to anger.

And so he said something like, well, there's such a thing as no anger, and there's such a thing, angerless, if you like, there's such a thing as unrestrained anger, and then there's such a thing, Aristotle said, as controlled and justified anger.

And is that not what the wrath of God, for example, is all about? His anger is not unrestrained.

[8 : 05] If he had no anger, he wouldn't be much of a god. If he didn't have a controlled and justified anger against any evil. Similarly, ourselves, if we didn't have any controlled and justified anger against injustice, against people that are oppressed and exploited, and so on.

So that is the kind of method that Aristotle used in seeking to understand the concept of meekness. In our English translations, the word that's usually translated for meekness is either gentleness or humility.

And I'm sure Aristotle would have said something like this. He would have said, there's such a thing as cowardice and timidity. That's not meekness.

And there's such a thing as aggressiveness. That's not meekness. But meekness is something that is controlled and something that is harnessed and measured and moderate.

And similarly, with humility, other English words of translating it, he would have perhaps spoken about hubris, which is the most dangerous form of pride that was explored very much in the great ancient Greek tragedy plays.

[9 : 38] This is a pride where a person is so arrogant and so blind to their pride that they bring about disaster for themselves and for others.

Think, for instance, of Adolf Hitler. Now, but as well as this hubris, there is a false humility. And we have to guard against that as well.

That false humility that sort of keeps saying, I am no use. I can't do this. I don't have this skill and so on. Indeed, Paul in Romans has an interesting statement, I think, about this point.

Because in Romans 12, chapter 3, he says, For by the grace given to me, I say to every one of you, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment. So there is an interesting statement by Paul who's encouraging us not to have false humility and certainly not to have hubris and not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, but to think soberly.

[10 : 56] You see that middle ground coming again. If I could just say that all true religion begins with this true humility and a sense this meekness, this sense of our creatureliness and our need of God.

The word is also used in Greek of a domesticated wild animal that has been trained to be self-disciplined and controlled.

So the pattern of meekness, and that's what I've made the title of my first point, the pattern of meekness is this middle way, this via media, this middle way of gentleness, of humility, governed by a self-control.

And it is only by grace, of course, that we can have this self-control and that we can have this meekness. I was reading recently a little article about how you tame a wild stallion. Don't worry, I'm not thinking of getting one here in Del Bride. And this is what I read. Goal one, get the horse, the wild stallion to trust you.

[12 : 15] Goal two, be as calm as possible to let it know that you're not a threat. Goal three, slowly reach out your arm and get it used to your scent.

And as I read that, I thought, in a way, it's a lovely picture of how Jesus, the meek one, has drawn us to himself.

His wonderful being has attracted us to place our trust in him. He's reached out his arm and we've sensed the gentleness of his love and compassion.

Come, he says, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly. This, then, is meekness. It's not a quality that is insipid or timid or weak or groveling or cowardice.

It's a quality that is given by the grace of God to those that put their trust in Jesus Christ. I wonder, is there anyone out there who still needs to be tamed by the meek one, who still needs to enter the fellowship of the meek, and who still needs to grab that arm that is reaching out to you, the arm of the meek one.

[13 : 43] And this leads me to my second point, the power of meekness. And I'm thinking here, the power of meekness in the life and witness of the church.

Sadly, meekness is a quality that has sometimes been conspicuous by its absence in the history of the church. In Jesus's day, the attitude of the religious leaders toward the mass of sinners was anything but gentle and humble.

Think of the story of the woman caught in adultery. They dragged the woman to Jesus, threw her down at his feet and said, the law says stoner, what do you say?

I don't know about you, but I don't see much gentleness and meekness there. Think of the fact that the church in the past would publicly humiliate people who had sinned.

We need to take this beatitude seriously in our life and witness as a church. In our family life, we can ask ourselves in our behavior, in our actions, in our relationships with family, how much of this gentleness and how much of this humility do we see?

[15 : 04] Towards our children, towards our spouses, towards our neighbors, towards our friends. It's so often, isn't it, not what we say, but how we say it.

A soft answer or a gentle answer turns away anger. Our witness as Christians must include, I believe, this gentleness and humility.

Let me just point you to some scriptures that highlight this for us. Now, for example, in Galatians, in chapters 5 and 23, we read that gentleness is part of the fruit of the Spirit.

And he's got, interestingly, gentleness and self-control. If we go to, over the page to Galatians chapter 6, we read this, Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore the person gently.

And then, of course, if we go to 1 Peter, 1 Peter, 1 Peter chapter 3, I think it is, rather, verse 4.

[16 : 40] We read this. He's talking about the beauty that we should seek to encourage and nourish in ourselves.

And he says, rather, Peter says, rather it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.

Let no one ever say that weakness doesn't matter within the church. It is important.

When the church adorns itself with meekness, it has an attractiveness, a warmth, an approachability that can make people feel, here is a place I can come to.

I will be among other wounded and broken people, wounded by our sin and shortcomings, broken by the slings and arrows of life and loss, but welcomed by a community who always points me to Jesus, the meek one.

[17 : 55] Surely, this is part of our challenge in the 21st century, to win the crowds of the broken and hurting and guilty sinners to the fellowship of the meek.

So, we've seen that pattern of meekness. One way to remember it is like that wild stallion that has been tamed.

It's like ourselves that have come to the fountain of grace and been tamed by that grace. And we've looked there at the power of meekness for the witness and life of the church.

Thirdly and finally, I want to look at the promise given to the meek. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. First thing I want to ask about this third point, the promise given to me, is this. To whom is this promise given? And I want you to notice it's not to ethnic Jews or Judaism or Israel. [19:07] Indeed, none of the Beatitudes are promised to Jews or Judaism or Israel. All of the Beatitudes which describe the true people of God, including this one, are non-ethnic and non-racial.

They are universal, moral and spiritual qualities. For in God's kingdom, the kingdom of Jesus, it is not race or religion that count.

But, thinking of this Beatitude, it's gentleness and humility. The promise then is exclusively and universally to the meek.

Secondly, under this third point, the promise given to the meek, what are the meek promised? Now, most of the English translations, I've got about five or six that I've read, translate this Beatitude, they're promised the earth.

Of course, the New Testament word that's used here is the word that's also used for land. And, sometimes I wonder which way did Jesus mean the term to be understood as he uttered it in the mountaintop?

[20:37] I wonder, was it the land did Jesus mean them to understand? And, I wonder, did he mean them to understand it in a sacramental and symbolic way to bring home this stunning revelation that it was the politically and spiritually disenfranchised, the gentle and meek ones who would inherit the covenant promise?

But, remember this, the law was a shadow of things to come. Surely, the promise held out here is something more momentous than the geographical land of Israel.

Ultimately, it is God who is our portion and inheritance. The new heavens and the new earth are but the sacraments of the glory that we inherit.

And finally, on what grounds do the meek inherit the earth? How do they come by this inheritance?

Throughout history, powerful rulers have sought to inherit the earth of the not by building their empires based on greed, power, lust, and bloodshed.

The scramble for Africa, the slave trade, the Islamic caliphate, the crusades, all supposed that the earth could be conquered by force and might.

[22:18] But, Jesus declares, it is the meek who will ultimately inherit the earth. Jesus is in effect saying, if you want this inheritance to his people then and to people now, then become a member of the fellowship of the meek.

Then you will inherit the earth. It is the meek who are the rightful heirs, you see. It is their inheritance through their connection to Jesus Christ.

and that reminds us as we say that, that this inheritance wasn't secured for us through imperialistic grasping and exploitation or the slave trade, but by the meek one crucified on a cross and triumphantly raised by God from among the dead.

but when will the meek inherit this promise? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this, the renewal of the earth began at Golgotha where the meek one died.

Will you be among those who inherit the earth? are you part of the fellowship of the meek? As you stand gazing at this portrait, not the Mona Lisa, but this portrait of the people of the kingdom, but ultimately of Jesus Christ himself, does it make the hairs in the back of your neck stand up?

[24:08] Martin Luther King could say, God has two outstretched arms. One is strong enough to surround us with justice, and one is gentle enough to embrace us with grace.

Which arm are you going to grab hold of? Amen. We're now going to sing again.

of serve to riseStudio to forgive us and huge harm to – of