

The Fruit Of The Spirit: Meekness

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A popular hymn that received much acclaim several generations ago unintentionally derides our Savior as being "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." Meekness is a fruit of the Spirit that seems very much lost in our aggressive, self-centered culture. Because people associate it with weakness, most today do not admire others for being "meek," but as we shall see, it is not what they assume. It is a quality of character very noticeable in the greatest human being ever to grace this earth—and one that all of us sorely need today.

A modern English dictionary or thesaurus makes it clear why meekness is associated with weakness. Notice its synonyms as listed in the *Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Word Finder*: tame, timid, mild, bland, unambitious, retiring, weak, docile, acquiescent, repressed, suppressed, spiritless, broken, and wimpish. Not a single one of these words applies to Jesus Christ or even to Moses, who the Bible claims "was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3, KJV). Do these terms describe the warrior-king David, a man greatly beloved by God? Or Paul, the fearless and tireless apostle, who courageously faced his share and more of dangerous, painful persecutions? No, yet once we understand what biblical meekness is, we can easily see that these men were indeed meek.

Surely our understanding of this remarkable characteristic must be askew! Bible commentators generally agree that modern man, living in our Western, Judeo-Christian cultures, lacks this godly attribute. Meekness, being a fruit of the Spirit, is an attribute of God Almighty Himself and important to our being in His image and a true witness. Indeed, this characteristic will largely determine how much peace and contentment are in our lives and how well we do during trials.

Blessed Are the Meek?

Meekness is so important that it is the third characteristic Jesus mentions in His foundational teaching, the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). Obviously, the world's ideal of the perfect man is very different from His. The meek are among those so favored that they will share in Jesus' inheritance of the earth.

He was not the first to state the importance of meekness, but He was the first to collect, in what we call the Beatitudes, a God-authored, organized list of the characteristics of the perfect man. Others have made lists of outstanding virtues, but Jesus' list is unique in that He relates them to the Kingdom of God and in the depth and breadth of what He meant.

How can this be, though? Given how modern man considers those who are meek, His statement about meekness is almost incomprehensible. The world would word this, "Blessed are the strong, who can hold their own." The world favors more conspicuous and so-called heroic virtues. Those who are strongly—almost fiercely—competitive, aggressive and assertive are the ones who receive recognition, admiration and reward. Do they not seem to end up on top of the pile, possessing the most and best despite other obvious and perhaps even offensive flaws in their character?

On the surface, this beatitude seems to have little meaning, and what there is seems to contradict the plain facts of everyday life. No sensible person, looking about the world or studying history, could sincerely accept it at face value. Unfortunately, many Christians have ignored it in practice, perhaps regretting that no doubt it should be true, but that it certainly is not so in the real world. Rather than taking God at His Word, they remain conformed to the world's standard of practice, missing the benefits meekness will produce in their lives. Remember, Jesus Himself says this: Blessed—happy, favored—are the meek.

So we must decide. Jesus either meant what He said, or He did not; He either knew what He was talking about, or He did not. Jesus is either a reliable guide or He is not. We must either take Jesus seriously or not, and if we do not, we should drop His teaching altogether. If we decide to straddle the fence and strive for some characteristics but not others, we become hypocrites. Of course, the true Christian will accept it, learn from it and grow in it.

What Jesus says is a very practical doctrine. It may at first seem impractical, foolish and even wild, but He was no sentimental dreamer who dealt in empty platitudes. He was an unflinching realist who has given us a great key to prosperity and dominion under God's purpose. One commentator, Emmet Fox, author of an entire book on the Sermon on the Mount, states that this beatitude "is among the half dozen most important verses in the Bible."

"The meek shall inherit the earth," and when they do, they will proceed to govern it. Meekness is a virtue God has determined those who will have dominion in His Family must possess. Without it, will we even be there?

What Does Meekness Mean?

We do not stand alone in our perception of this word. The ancient Greeks did not rank it as a virtue either, except in a very narrow circumstance. At best, they used it as we use "condescension" today and by it referred entirely to men's external relations with other men. Jesus, while retaining its reference to men, lifted it from its narrow context and made it refer primarily to our relations with God. In his comments on Galatians 5:22, William Barclay adds that meekness is "the most untranslatable of words in the New Testament" (p. 51).

Some have tried to use "humility" as its equivalent, but both Hebrew and Greek have specific words that are synonyms for humility. Besides, humility does not fully catch its meaning. Another word associated with meekness is "gentleness," but the same is as true for gentleness as humility. Both are part of meekness, but it is not really either. Its characteristics and use are much more involved than either of them.

The Hebrew word translated "meekness" is *anav* or *anaw*, meaning "depressed (figuratively), in mind (gentle) or circumstances (needy, especially saintly): humble, lowly, meek, poor" (*Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, #6035). The translation depends upon the context in which it appears. The *Gesenius Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon* adds, "afflicted, miserable . . . ; commonly with the added notion of a lowly, pious, and modest mind, which prefers to bear injuries rather than return them" (p. 643). The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* indicates why this word is so difficult to express as a single term: "*anaw* expresses the intended outcome of affliction" (p. 1651).

The Greek word, *prautes*, the one to which Barclay referred, is no easier. James Strong defines it only as "mildness; i.e., (by implication) humility" (#4240). *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* says that "Plato opposes it to fierceness or cruelty" (vol. 1, p. 37). In *The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament*, Spiros Zodhiates writes:

Prautes, according to Aristotle, is the middle standing between two extremes, getting angry without reason, and not getting angry at all. Therefore, *prautes* is getting angry at the right time, in the right measure, and for the right reason. . . . [I]t is a condition of mind and heart which demonstrates gentleness, not in weakness, but in power. It is a balance born in strength of character. (p. 1209-1210)

We can now begin to see why Barclay considered it the most untranslatable of New Testament words. This is so because Jesus elevated the word's common usage far beyond its normal application. Because men so easily reject the Bible, they have not accepted Jesus' usage of the word into the common languages. To mankind in general, meekness means what its common synonyms illustrate.

Meekness and the Beatitudes

Perhaps the best way to understand meekness is to see the words and contexts the Bible associates it with, how the Bible uses it, and perhaps most importantly, how those who have it act in relation to God and men.

We should recognize that, when Jesus presents meekness in Matthew 5:5 as a highly desirable quality, He prefaces it with "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (verse 3) and "Blessed are those who mourn" (verse 4). He places it within a context that contains qualities that are similar to meekness. Alexander MacLaren writes in his comments on verse 5, "[Meekness] is the conduct and disposition towards God and man which follows from the inward experience described in the two former Beatitudes, which had relation only to ourselves" (*Expositions of Holy Scriptures*, vol. 6, "St. Matthew," p. 130). In other words, meekness is the active fruit of the other two, but whereas being poor in spirit and mourning are both internal in operation, meekness is both internal and external in its execution in one's life. Though this is not a complete description, it lays a good foundation.

Godly meekness is impossible unless we first learn a just and lowly estimate of ourselves. We must become poor in spirit. We do this by coming before God in deep penitence and with a clear knowledge of the vast difference between ourselves and what He is and what He means us to be. Paul says in Romans 12:3, "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith." While pride destroys self and others, humility serves and builds.

Mourning springs from a sense of sin, from a tender conscience, from a broken heart. It is a godly sorrow over our rebellion against God and hostility to His will. It is the agonizing realization that it was not just sin in general but *our own* sins that nailed Christ to the stake. Notice that Matthew 5:4 is in the present tense, meaning that mourning is not confined to our initial repentance—it is a continuous experience. The Christian has much to mourn. If his conscience is kept tender by an ever-deepening discovery of human nature's depravity, his sins—both of omission and commission—are a sense of daily grief. Paul writes in Romans 8:23, "[W]e ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body." He adds in Romans 7:24, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

At the same time, this does not mean a Christian lives his life with a hang-dog expression and attitude, or that he lives his life feeling that he is a dirtbag or sleazeball who is still mucking around in a moral septic tank. A Christian is also forgiven, cleansed and justified by the blood of Jesus Christ. He has access to God the Father, is the apple of His eye and has an awesome hope before him. In him He has the Holy Spirit. He is a child of the great Creator and looks forward to being resurrected and inheriting God's Kingdom. Christ died for him, and this creation exists for his perfection. A Christian has many reasons to feel a sense of exultation for what has been provided for him. An awareness of sin—as long as it is not allowed to become obsessive—will help him continue in a humble frame of mind by keeping pride in check, tempering his judgments and allowing him to accept the events of life in a spirit that produces great contentment.

These qualities are produced when, with God's help, we rightly measure ourselves against the right standards—God and His law—rather than each other, and discover how much we owe to God's merciful grace. Anyone thus convicted and then forgiven and cleansed by Christ's blood is in the position to produce godly meekness.

Meekness and Lowliness

In Matthew 11:29, Jesus links meekness with lowliness: "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle [*meek*, KJV] and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Ephesians 4:1-3 states:

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness [*meekness*, KJV], with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The King James version is correct, as the Greek text uses *prautes*. "Gentle" and "gentleness" are incorrect because in this context they are only an aspect of the meekness we should express in our dealings with others.

In Matthew 11:29, Jesus is explaining why we should embrace His way of life. As our Lord and Master, He is not harsh, overbearing and oppressive, but gentle in His government. His laws are also reasonable and easy to obey; neither He nor they enslave. He emphasizes the gentle aspect of meekness toward others. From this, we begin to see why meekness must be a virtue of those who will receive the Kingdom and govern. Because God governs in meekness, His children must also.

Ephesians 4 teaches how to build and maintain unity within a more social context, and here, *prautes* appears with humility, patience, forbearance and love. Paul demands that, for unity to be built and maintained, we should receive offenses without retaliation, bearing them patiently without a desire for revenge. We are, in short, to have a forgiving spirit. Without it, we will surely promote divisiveness.

The association of humility and meekness is natural, and is yet another facet of meekness. Whereas humility deals with a correct assessment of his merits, meekness covers a correct assessment of personal rights. This does not in any way mean a lowering of the standards of justice or of right and wrong. Meekness can be accompanied by a war to the death against evil, but the meek Christian

directs this warfare first against the evil in his own heart. He is a repentant sinner, and his recognition of this state radically alters his relations with fellow man. A sinner forgiven must have a forgiving attitude.

Conflict in Corinth

In addition, godly meekness cannot be divorced from its association with gentleness. However, this gentleness is not usually seen in the situations where the Bible's writers use meekness. Notice II Corinthians 10:1: "Now I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—who in presence am lowly among you, but being absent am bold toward you." Here, meekness appears with gentleness, as though a similarity exists alongside a specific difference.

The reason for this is that Paul is dealing with conflict. In II Corinthians 10, Paul begins a defense of his apostolic authority, showing that he had a right to regard himself as sent from God. He begins his argument by appealing to the gentleness and meekness of Christ to vindicate his own evenhanded approach, entreating them not to give him occasion to display the boldness and severity that he could also use. He had no wish to be so bold and severe in his discipline of them. The contrast between meekness and severity shows starkly here. Meekness is a specific virtue, tool, way or fruit that is excellent in dealing with conflict or potential conflict within relationships.

Some, who had invaded the congregation and claimed to be apostles, accused Paul of being courageous and bold when writing letters from a distance, but timid and weak-kneed when personally present. They were, in effect, accusing him of being all bark and no bite. They had badly misjudged him through a combination of his gentle and reasoned approach when founding the congregation and, apparently, what they considered his weak physical appearance and plain, uncultured speaking. But Paul, though he may have appeared weak to them, was in reality meek, not weak. He was prepared to fight this poisonous, destructive evil within the congregation with all his spiritual power—which was, as the Bible shows, considerable.

Paul did not seek to show himself to the congregation as a flamboyant, charismatic personality. He was not there to showcase himself. He and his presentation were not the centerpiece and spiritual strength of the church. The Father, Jesus Christ and the gospel of the Kingdom were Paul's focus, and he wanted the people to focus their lives there as well. Thus, he presented them in the manner he did.

He is a sterling example of a truly meek Christian. The meek person has ceased to think or care about himself. His pride and self-will have been crucified. He does not measure the importance of events by their relation to his personal comfort or what he will gain from them. He sees everything from God's perspective, seeking only to serve His purpose in the situations life imposes.

Meek, Yet Stern as Steel

This does not mean the meek will take everything "lying down." Notice Moses, who as we have seen, was the meekest man of his time. He did not hesitate to order the execution of about three thousand of the idolaters who worshipped the Golden Calf while he was with God on the mountain (Exodus 32: 25-28). Against evil this meek man was as stern as steel. How a meek man reacts depends upon what he discerns God's will is for him within the circumstance. Because the meek man sets his mind on God's purpose and not his own comfort, ambition or reputation, he will offer implacable resistance to evil in defense of God yet react with patience, kindness and gentleness when others attack him.

Jesus set a clear example of this pattern of reaction too. He made a whip of rope, and with stern and vehement energy, overturned the tables and drove the livestock, their sellers and moneychangers from the Temple compound because they had turned God's house into a common bazaar by their sacrilege. With simple, forthright, firm instructive answers and incisive questions, He met the twisted, intellectual, carnal reasoning of the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. Yet as Matthew 12:19-20 reads, "He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench." Peter adds:

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. (I Peter 2:21-23)

A meek person will feel the wrong done against him and feel it bitterly. But because he is not thinking of himself, his meekness does not allow his spirit to give vent to a hateful, savage and vindictive anger that seeks to "get even." He will instead be full of pity for the damaged character, attitudes and blindness of the perpetrator. From the stake Jesus uttered, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). This virtue is a strong bulwark against self-righteousness and intolerant and critical judgment of others. Yet neither does it excuse or condone sin. Rather, a meek person understands it more clearly, thus his judgment is tempered, avoiding reacting more harshly than is necessary.

Paul writes in Titus 3:1-2, "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility [*meekness*, KJV] to all men." The possibility of conflict is inherent where the subject includes our relationship with governments; it is quite easy to have conflict with those in authority over us. Some in positions of authority take pleasure in wielding their power, as Jesus notes in Matthew 20:25: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them."

On the flip side are those under authority, and this is where Paul's main emphasis is in Titus 3. Humans, by nature, tend to be very sensitive, critical and harsh in their judgments of those over them. It frequently results in slanderous attacks and quarrels against those in authority—sometimes even in revolutions. Paul advises us to be non-belligerent, considerate, unassertive and meek. If the fruit of meekness has been produced in either or both parties, peace and unity are more possible because a major tool is in place to allow both to perform their responsibilities within the relationship correctly.

A Natural Meekness

What has gradually emerged from these many elements is that meekness is what results when one's spiritual knowledge, understanding and passions are in right balance. A carnal or natural meekness exists, but it is born from a person simply not wanting to become involved, from not understanding what is happening or from a lack of firmness. It is usually timid, conforms readily, and is easily deterred from doing good and persuaded to do evil. It sometimes forms the great defect in religious people's character, as in the cases of Eli and Jehoshaphat.

Eli's spirit should have burned with righteous indignation over the abominations his sons flagrantly committed, but he could not bring himself to correct them:

Then the Lord said to Samuel: "Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them. And therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever." (I Samuel 3:11-14)

Jehoshaphat's downfall was in his relationship with Ahab, king of Israel, who was one of the most vile kings ever to rule over Israel. He allied himself with Ahab through a marriage. At one point Ahab proposed a military alliance with Judah to defeat the Syrians. Jehoshaphat, Judah's king, was reluctant and requested that they consult a prophet of God. The prophet Micaiah was brought before them, and he made it perfectly clear that the purpose of the alliance was not of God and they would lose the battle. However, Jehoshaphat lacked the will to withdraw his support and went into the battle anyway. Ahab perished, and Jehoshaphat lived only because God intervened.

II Chronicles 19:2-3 shows that this was not the end of the matter:

And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to King Jehoshaphat, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord? Therefore the wrath of the Lord is upon you. Nevertheless good things are found in you, in that you have removed the wooden images from the land, and have prepared your heart to seek God."

Both Eli and Jehoshaphat were what we would call "good men." They were religious, pious men who sought God within the framework of their own interests. God reveals, though, that they also had a serious character weakness that kept them from glorifying God to their highest potential and caused serious punishments and even curses to come upon them.

God desires more of us: "Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him" (Hebrews 10:38). Faith—confidence—is part of meekness, and thus the meek are not timid. Notice Paul's encouragement to Timothy: "Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1:6-7).

Meekness and Trials

As shown earlier, meekness is the by-product of a number of elements, not the least of which are deep, thorough humility and an awareness of the seriousness of what our past conduct produced, especially toward Jesus Christ. These things have tamed the beast, broken our self-will and made our minds receptive to the pure influences of God's Spirit. This is not natural but supernatural, the product of God's grace toward us and His Spirit working and growing in us. It very deeply, sometimes radically, alters our perspective of God, His purpose, the trials of life, the self and other people.

This is very important regarding trials because meekness is the opposite of self-will toward God and of ill-will toward men. In his commentary on Matthew 5:5, Matthew Henry writes, "The meek are those who quietly submit themselves to God, to His word and to His rod, who follow His directions, and comply with His designs, and are gentle towards all men" (p. 1629).

Meekness is the fruit of God by His Spirit working in us. Godly sorrow softens our stiff-necked rebellion and our hearts so that we are made receptive to the workings of the Creator to produce His image in us. Therefore meekness, along with the qualities already mentioned, also includes our becoming pliable, malleable, submissive and teachable. A New Testament term for this condition might be "childlike."

God disciplines every son He loves (Hebrews 12:6), and sometimes the disciplines are very difficult to bear. We have passionate drives within us to flee from them, or at the very least, to grumble and murmur under their burden. But the meek will not do this. They will endure the privation, embarrassment, pain, loss, ignorance or persecution with quiet patience because they know that God is sovereign over all and He is working in their lives.

Aaron's response to God's execution of his two sons is an example:

Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This what the Lord spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.'" So Aaron held his peace. (Leviticus 10:1-3)

This was a shocking, bitter pill to swallow, but Aaron took it properly, meekly. He was growing. In Psalm 39:9, David refers to a difficult situation he was experiencing, leaving us this example: "I was mute, I did not open my mouth, because it was You who did it."

The supreme example of this is Jesus Christ, who endured horrific trials though He was the Son of God's love. John 18:11 says, "Then Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?'" Acts 8:32 contains more insight on Christ's meek reaction: "He was led [not dragged] as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so He opened not His mouth." He was the very King of meekness.

Meekness enables a person to bear patiently those insults and injuries he receives at the hand of others. It makes him ready to accept instruction from the least of the saints. It allows him to endure provocation without being inflamed by it. He remains cool when others become heated. Meek people seek no private revenge; they leave that to God's sense of justice while they seek to remain true in their calling and meet God's standards.

The spirit of meekness enables its possessor to squeeze great enjoyment from his earthly portion, be it small or great. Delivered from a greedy and grasping disposition, he is satisfied with what he has. Contentment of mind is one of the fruits of meekness. The haughty and covetous do not inherit the earth. As Psalm 37:16 says, "A little that a righteous man has is better than the riches of many wicked."

A Valuable Fruit

This much misunderstood and maligned virtue is the antidote for most of the nervous anxiety that is greatly intensifying the normal day-to-day stresses of life. God commands us in Zephaniah 2:3:

Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility [*meekness*, KJV]. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger.

How valuable is that blessing?

There is more:

The poor [*meek*, KJV] shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek Him will praise the Lord. Let your heart live forever! (Psalm 22:26)

Further, "The Lord lifts up the humble (*meek*, *KJV*); He casts the wicked down to the ground" (Psalm 147:6).

Finally:

The humble [*meek*, KJV] also shall increase their joy in the Lord, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 29:19).

This is not a virtue to ignore because carnal men consider it weakness. It may appear to them as weakness, but the spiritual reality is that it is great strength, an attribute of Almighty God and a fruit of His Spirit we greatly need.