

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5)

For three years I was a Law student – I wasn't a bad law student but I don't remember much of it now

- One thing I do remember comes from the very first week of my course – 'zebra crossings'
- I can't guarantee that the law has not changed in the 35 years since I graduated
- So, I must apply the common disclaimer, 'don't try this at home'
- In a famous law case *Hughes v. Hall* (1960) it was established that the only defence
- For a motorist who hit a pedestrian on a zebra crossing was that the pedestrian was attempting suicide
- Armed with the *Road Traffic Act*, the *Highway Code*, some law books and the will to live
- In September 1976, several long-haired students, in turtle neck sweaters and high-waisted jeans
- Went to the nearest zebra crossing to jump out on unsuspecting motorists
- Proudly proclaiming, 'I know my rights' much to the bewilderment of the drivers
- I still think of it every time I go across a zebra crossing – but other people have it off to a fine art
- They know their rights on just about everything, and are not afraid to tell you so
- They are super-assertive, forceful, arrogant, superior, self-important
- Asserting your rights whether in empires or on zebra crossings is not what we would call 'meek'
- And if we are looking for yet another absurdity in the Bible – we have it right here
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth

If there is one type of person we would think would not gain the whole earth it is the meek person

- By worldly standards if you want to gain power, wealth and possessions you have to be pushy
- You have to be adept at self-advancement and self-promotion, claim your rights, stand up for yourself
- Or if it is not your style to be so upfront, then how about scheming, manipulating and double-dealing?
- Where selfish ambition enters in, meekness has to bail out

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest body of the teaching of Jesus that we have (Matthew 5-7)

- but on closer examination, however inspiring the Sermon on the Mount might be
- we cannot doubt that, by ordinary human standards, its teaching is impossible to achieve
- if we looked for a text on which Jesus was teaching in this Sermon on the Mount, where six times he says
- ‘you have heard that is was said but I say to you,’ (or similar) it would be hard to better his own words
- ‘A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another
- By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’ (John 13:34-35)
- But if keeping the letter of the law in a limited understanding of the commandments was hard
- Keeping the spirit of the law as Jesus expounds it is harder still and at the climax of this passage he says
- ‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48) – how can we be like God?

The Sermon on the Mount was addressed to disciples, those who had responded to the message of the Kingdom

- Part of that response was repentance (3:2, 4:17) which deals with the wrong in our lives
- The Sermon on the Mount is about both the forgiveness of sins and the transformation of lives
- It opens with ‘the Beatitudes’, a name that comes from the Latin *beatus* (blessed, still the best translation)
- ‘happy’ has been devalued and cheapened in modern usage and, in any event, the focus tends to be inside
- Whereas the focus of the Beatitudes is how we stand before God whose blessing rests on unlikely people
- So much so that the usual order of things is turned upside down, or more accurately, the right way up
- The third of these sayings is ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’ – it seems absurd
- But what if we are meek, because we mourn over our sins and over our spiritual poverty
- That meekness follows on from the previous Beatitudes, in some kind of sequence
- Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek
- And that the person who is meek is that way before God, before the fellowship and before the world

I HOW AM I BEFORE GOD?

If there is one type of person who will not gain the earth I think it is someone who is 'meek'

- A friend, who is an English-learner, recently asked me what 'meek' meant – I found it difficult to say
- In the end, I said that if we imagined what Jesus was like in his dealings with others
- 'Gentle (meek) and humble in heart', we were probably as near to a definition of 'meek' as we could get
- Have you ever tried to move something that is far too heavy for you to move – perhaps it is also fragile?
- The object is in danger because you cannot either raise it or lower it smoothly – it is just too much
- But when a stronger, bigger, taller person appears, he seems to do what you were trying to do effortlessly
- It is not that something fragile is in danger because of his great strength, in fact it is safer
- I think this is what meekness means, a characteristic of humility coupled with gentleness but not weakness
- It is not a person who is quiet because he or she is a mouse, timid or impossibly shy
- It is a person with strength of character manifested in patience, humility, gentleness and teachability

There seems little doubt that, in this Beatitude, the Lord Jesus has Psalm 37:11 in mind

- The meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity – it is not something that we gain
- It is something that we inherit, that is it is God who wills it to us
- For the believer, therefore, meekness simply follows on from an acute self-awareness before God
- We are poor in spirit, we can only be intensely sad (mourn) about our fallenness and sin
- We will acknowledge the greatness of God, come before him and his word with humility
- Not necessarily because we are mild-mannered and genteel but because we know who God is
- And we know who we are – and how it is only God in Christ who guarantees our spiritual inheritance
- For, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we inherit the things of God by his death on the cross

II HOW AM I BEFORE THE FELLOWSHIP?

When we begin to get our relationship with God straightened out, ‘How am I before God?’

- We can also begin to get our other relationships, especially in the Christian fellowship, straightened out
- Sometimes called the ‘Father of Latin Christianity’, Tertullian observed how the world viewed Christians:

‘Look,’ they say, ‘how they love one another’ (for they themselves hate one another);
‘and how they are ready to die for each other’ (for they themselves are readier to kill each other). (Often rendered: ‘see how these Christians love one another.’)

And yet, today, in church, we tend to use the quotation almost exclusively in an ironic sense

- Because we find people who are supposed to be fellow Christians not speaking to one another
- Avoiding one another, not looking each other in the eye, and holding an inward bitterness against another

The Greek word that is translated in the third Beatitude ‘meek’ appears in other places in the New Testament

- The Apostle Paul (Col. 3:12) wrote:

‘Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness (or meekness) and patience. Bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.’

Here meekness has two elements – patience and forgiveness, we don’t gain these naturally but from God

- The Apostle James (1:21) wrote, ‘humbly (meekly) accept the word planted in you which can save you’

III HOW AM I BEFORE THE WORLD?

The most common objections I hear to the outward practice of Christianity (attending church services often)

- Is ‘I am just as good as the people who go to church’ or even ‘I am just as good a Christian’
- With the latter, I am more straightforward in my answer than I used to be
- For 50 years, for better or for worse (largely it seems for worse) I have been a Plymouth Argyle fan
- If an armchair supporter, who is not there in the wind and rain against Accrington Stanley
- But who just might be there in the sunshine against Arsenal were to tell me they are as much a fan as me
- It must be because Argyle have drawn a big team in a cup tie and they are after a ticket
- As Christians are repeatedly commanded in the New Testament to meet together (e.g. Heb. 10:25)
- A person who does not meet with others in worship, learning, fellowship, communion and prayer
- Cannot possibly claim to be as good a Christian as the person who does that often
- But for one thing – if the person who goes to the church regularly is no different because of it
- And here is the heart of it – the Beatitudes are not a matter of outward conformity to rules and regulations
- But a matter of an inward change: being poor in spirit, mourning over our sins and being meek
- Before God, before the fellowship and before the world – in the words of the Apostle James again

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom?” (James 3:13)

All this shows that the Beatitudes are not so different from the fruit of the spirit (characteristics of one fruit)

- Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness (meekness), self-control
- Like these characteristics, the Beatitudes are not alternatives but a series of characteristics of one person

To be meek means that our attitude to God is different

- It means that before God we have no choice but to accept his greatness and Lordship
- That we realise that he is holy and we are sinful and need forgiveness
- That we have nothing in which we can boast – except the cross of Jesus Christ

To be meek means that our attitude in the Christian fellowship is different

- It means that we must show consideration for others
- That we do not get uptight about our rights
- That we prove by our deeds that Christ reigns in our hearts

To be meek means that our attitude to the world in general is different

- It means that we do not act as if we are superior to people who we consider not Christian
- That we are prepared to say that we are probably not as good as they are but that we are forgiven
- But as the Apostle Peter reminds us (1 Peter 3:15):

‘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 (meekness) and respect.’

In worship, in fellowship and in witness – we must show the character of Christ, ‘meekness’

- ‘meekness’ is not weakness – it has the strength to be hurt rather than to hurt others
- For Jesus it was the strength to go the cross – that was true meekness
- And as adopted sons we share in his inheritance, for inheritance is not earned
- But is given to sons – ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’