



If I were to ask you to list adjectives that you would be pleased to have attached to your name, what would you say? Perhaps you might say *kind*, *loving*, *compassionate*, *smart*, or *funny*. There are any number of other adjectives you might choose, but I would feel very confident in guessing that *meek* would not be one of them.

But what's wrong with being *meek*? What is it about the word *meek* that makes us want to say *don't use that word with me!* We probably wouldn't mind a synonym, such as *gentle*, but let's leave *meek* alone. The word *meek* sounds too much like *doormat* or *milquetoast* for us.

I was an avid comic book reader when I was young, and in almost all of them there appeared an ad for a Charles Atlas workout program. If you read comic books back in the 60s and 70s you probably saw it too. I have to admit, as a rather scrawny kid, I was tempted to send off for the workout plan in hopes that I could overcome the perception that I was meek and weak.



The problem with the word *meek* is that it reminds us of that scrawny guy on the beach getting sand kicked in his face by the big, muscular guy, and who wants to be that guy?

This morning, we continue our series of message on the Beatitudes, and today we come to the third beatitude – *blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*. For our Scripture text we will again

read the passage that contains the entirety of the beatitudes –

Matthew 5:1-12

*1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,*

*2 and he began to teach them. He said:*

*3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.*

*8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.*

*12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

When we talk about the word *meek* there is one thing we need to clarify at the beginning, and it is this –

*Meek Is Not Weak.*

Our culture has basically destroyed any idea that one would aspire to meekness. No one wants to be known or remembered as weak. No one ever says, in answer to the question, *how do you want to be remembered?* *Well, I would like first and foremost to be remembered as being a very meek person.*

One of the difficulties of a verse such as this one is the way in which the meanings of words change over time. Some words take on different meanings and we lose any understanding of what the word means in its original context. What do you think when you hear the word *awful*. Something terrible, correct? The word *awful* once meant to *be full of awe* towards something, such as God. What about *backlog*? We usually think of that big pile of work on our desks, but it used to mean the biggest log on the fire. *Sick* used to mean to be ill, and still does, but it is also often used to mean something that is really great, such as *that song is really sick!* But please do me a favor and don't tell me on your way out today that my sermon was really sick!

The Greek word translated as *meek* is *praus*, and it does not mean to be physically weak or easily intimidated or any of the qualities that we would normally associate with being a *meek* person. It was often used to describe, for instance, a very strong horse – perhaps a warhorse – that had been broken. Its strength was not removed, but rather was controlled and contained. The word then came to mean someone who had strength and power but used that strength and power in a positive way, rather than a way that was harmful or destructive. That's a very different way of thinking about *meek*, isn't it?

Jesus was saying that the people who are meek – the people who will inherit the earth – are people who understand the true nature of power. Real power is not the kind that imposes its strength upon others, as we commonly see power exercised in our world. History has shown us time and again that such power – military might, in particular – is what so many leaders and nations aspire to, but it is not the kind of power upon which God's kingdom is based. Empires and rulers and armies come and go, but Jesus says there is a power that outlasts all other powers, and it is greater than the kind of power sought after by the kingdoms of the world. Now, that is not to say that the power that forms the

foundations of kingdoms and empires and armies does not have an effect upon people. That kind of power has harmed and oppressed and killed scores of people throughout history, and it is that harm and oppression and violence that Jesus says must be opposed and it is what he opposed.

Jesus was not a meek person; not in the way most people think of meekness today. It took a great deal of courage to enter into the Temple, to fashion a whip, and then take that whip and drive the moneychangers from the Temple (*13 When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. 15 So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"* John 2:13-16.) To challenge and disrupt the commerce and financial system that had overtaken the Temple in that time took incredible courage, courage that recognized taking such action was to risk one's life. Jesus was not afraid to publicly criticize the religious leaders for their hypocrisy, for their lack of compassion, and for their corruption. He was not afraid to say to them *27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness* (Matthew 23:27-28). He was not afraid to call them *blind guides* (Matthew 15:14). That is a kind of strength and power that is willing to stand up for those who are oppressed, for those who are treated unjustly, for those who are cast aside by society, and for those who are forgotten by those who have the power and the means to make their lives better. There was a power to Jesus, but it was a power of a different kind.

*It Is This Kind of Meekness – Which is God's Kind of Power – That Will Inherit the Earth.*

At the beginning of this series I said that part of what Jesus sought to do in the Beatitudes was to open our eyes to truth. We are products of our time and our historical moment, and as products of our time we are very influenced by the context in which we live, including the ways in which we think. Jesus always sought to open the eyes of his disciples to the reality that their thinking was also conditioned by their time period, and that means that we don't always recognize the faults in our thinking. This is why Jesus often spoke in paradoxical statements, such as *you have to lose your life to find it* (Matthew 16:25); *the first shall be last* (Mark 10:31); and *whoever wants to be great has to be a servant* (Matthew 20:26). This is the way that Jesus points out that much of what people think and aspire to is wrong. Our context can condition us to think that we should be out for ourselves, when the gospel teaches us that we are to serve others. Our context can condition us to be out for what we can get for ourselves, when the gospel teaches us that we are to give to others. This extends to how we think about power as well. We live in a culture that worships power. We certainly see the jockeying for power in our political realm every day. It is a realm where power reigns supreme.

To say that the meek will inherit the earth is, once again, similar to other statements Jesus made, in that they do not line up with the general expectations about the ways in which the world works. And therein lies an important truth and it is this – the ways in which the world works are often in direct opposition to the ways in which God desires for the world to work. In a worldly fashion it is the strong who get to call the shots and who get to control the ways in which the world works. In God's kingdom, however, the rules are not set by those who are the strongest or by those who exert the most brute force and sheer power. In God's kingdom, it is the expression of humility and gentleness that is lifted up as the model for the way in which we should live. And while it seems that brute force and power always carries the day, we know that kind of power is not the ultimate victor. Jesus is that great example of this truth, because though it seemed the mighty Roman Empire had the last word on his life and mission the resurrection proved otherwise. Humanity's thirst for such power has always proven to be a failed path.

How many other great kingdoms, with all their might and power, have fallen to the sands of time and become little more than a distant memory? The powerful may control the earth for a time, but they never keep it. Never. Alexander the Great sought to rule the world and almost succeeded, but he and his empire are long gone. The great British Empire? Long gone. The Soviet Union that struck fear in the heart of Western countries as they spread their Iron Curtain across Eastern Europe? Gone.

When I was young I was often bullied. It started when I was in elementary school and went through middle school and high school. I was never a very big guy – and I certainly wasn't intimidating or threatening – and I guess I made an easy target. When I was in fifth grade I was being bullied often on the school bus. A couple of guys would sit behind me, or across from me, or in the same seat, and tell me *today might be the day that we get off at your stop and beat you up*. It made for many a difficult day, wondering what might happen when I got off the school bus? Was I going to be beaten up?

Even though it was a long time ago, I very vividly remember the day when one of those guys slid into the seat behind me, put his arm on the seat in front of us to make sure I couldn't get out of the seat, and said *today's the day. What are you going to do?* Now, maybe I was desperate, but I remembered at that point something that my Sunday School teacher once told us. She said that God would not want us to fight, because God wanted us to love others. Perhaps she was simply trying to get through to a class filled with some rowdy boys, but her words stuck with me, and on that day I was ready to try anything, so when he asked me what I was going to do, I looked at him and said, *nothing. I'm not going to fight because God doesn't want me to fight. He wants me to love others*. I think he was stunned by my reply! I remember him nodding his head and saying, *okay. Okay*. He kept nodding his head and saying *okay* over and over. Finally, he got up and he and his cohorts left me alone. And I thought, *wow! This stuff really works!* So let me ask this – who has ever been, or is now, a Sunday School teacher? Please know this – if you have ever been, or if you currently teach Sunday School, it is incredibly important for you to teach those Scriptural lessons, and please know that what you say to your class is not only heard, but taken to heart! Sunday School teachers, don't ever think that your students aren't listening! I was. I took the advice I received in Sunday School and guess what? It worked!

Empires, rulers, and armies come and go, but Jesus says there is a power that outlasts all other powers, and it is the power of meekness, which is another word for love and humility. We should never mistake meekness for weakness. Meekness is a different kind of power. It is the power that comes from love and from humility. Jesus says this is a power far greater than that which is sought after by so many in our world. It is true power, it is the power that fuels the kingdom of God, and it is the power that Jesus asks us to demonstrate!