

“Gentle Giants”

Matthew 5:5

October 26, 2008

When I was a senior in High School, a girl invited me to come on her dad’s fishing boat on a 45 mile trip to the mouth of the Columbia River between Oregon and Washington State. All of a sudden, a big storm came up, and it was like on Gilligan’s Island: we had left for a three-hour tour, and then got hit with a squall, and 20-foot waves. We’d shoot straight up the side of a giant wave, then crest the top and crash into the trough on the other side, hanging on for dear life.

I learned something important that day—it’s really hard to stay cool in front of a girl when you’re going up 20-foot waves.

It’s humbling to be in the face of all that power of nature. We don’t value meekness and humility in our culture, but we admire being in control, keeping your cool.

Meekness wasn’t especially valued in Jesus’ time, either. People were looking for a conquering Messiah to free Jewish Palestine from the Romans.

In fact, some people hate meekness.

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche admired power and assertiveness, and he hated the idea of Christian meekness. He said it reflected the “slave morality” of Jesus. Nietzsche was wrong about can make you happy in life, but right that the Bible teaches the way of love and service. We see that in Paul’s letters to the churches:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (Ephesians 4:2)

Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Colossians 3:12)

But meekness isn’t weakness. In the story of “The Horse Whisperer,” a girl named Grace is in an accident with her horse, Pilgrim, and both are badly injured. Grace ends up losing her leg, Pilgrim is so traumatized it’s a danger to people around it, and several people think they should put the horse down. But Grace’s mother sees how important it is to save the animal. She takes her daughter and the horse from Connecticut across the country to a Montana Ranch, where a horse whisperer named Tom Booker agrees to work with them.

One day on the ranch, Pilgrim bolts, knocking Tom to the ground, gallops away into the meadow, and nobody thinks they’ll ever catch the horse. Tom Booker goes out and sits in the meadow, where the horse paws and snorts suspiciously, maybe 500 yards away. Tom waits quietly, meekly, as the shadows of the Ponderosa Pines lengthen across the meadow. The horse slowly makes his way back, until finally it’s muzzling Tom, and he reaches up and strokes the horse’s cheek, then slips on a muzzle, and the two walk back together. Tom is meek, but he’s sure not weak. He has the power to tame a wild horse.

Meekness is power under control.

It's what Jesus was. He said,

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:29)

Now, what Jesus was, we're called to be. It was an insight Van Gogh learned.

Modern historians have mostly argued that Van Gogh abandoned his early Christian faith. But Kathleen Ericson argued in her book *The Spiritual Vision of Vincent Van Gogh* that he had a very deep Christian faith. Yes, sadly, he did abandon the church, but his artistic work was an attempt to portray Christian truth in the language of modernity. He wrote over 700 letters to his brother Theo, and those letters are essentially his autobiography. He describes three books shaped him: the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan, and *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, the 15<sup>th</sup> century Rhineland mystic. These taught him that life in this world is a pilgrimage, not a destination; and that our goal on the pilgrimage is to become like Jesus. Like the hymn *Amazing Grace* says, "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come..." The Christian life is an adventure toward glory,

Jesus was gentle and humble. He said, "Even the Son of Man"—that's his name for himself—"did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). We should learn to be gentle with others because that's what Jesus is with us.

#### Meekness means you trust God, not yourself

Psalm 20:7 reads, "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God."

My paraphrase for that verse goes like this: "Some trust in bank accounts, and some in savings, but I'm going to trust in the name of the Lord our God. That means you don't trust in your job, your status, your reputation, your bank account, the stock market, or anything else.

Think about it: the three great challenges to a life of following Jesus are, like Richard Foster wrote, money, sex, and power. I think he's right. Christians have always known for God to make you who he wants you to be, you've got to give God control in those areas. That's why monks took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, to get control of those areas, to gain victory over those problematic challenges to the Christian life. The Protestant Reformation didn't like those solutions, though. They believed like Jesus said, we're to be in the world, but not "of" it. It means the solution is not to wall yourself off from the world in the cloister, but to let God take control of your life *in* the world. It's being meek, not trusting yourself, but God. When you do that, there's victory, and there's real power.

Psalm 37 echoes the theme of the meek inheriting the earth; that meekness, gentleness, humility win in the end. In fact, Jesus clearly echoes that psalm when he teaches this beatitude. Psalm 37 reads,

- 1 Do not fret because of evil men  
or be envious of those who do wrong;
- 2 for like the grass they will soon wither,  
like green plants they will soon die away.
- 3 Trust in the LORD and do good;  
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.

The Psalm continues in verse five:

- 5 Commit your way to the LORD;  
trust in him and he will do this:
- 6 He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,  
the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.
- 7 Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;  
do not fret when men succeed in their ways,  
when they carry out their wicked schemes.
- 8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;  
do not fret—it leads only to evil.
- 9 For evil men will be cut off,  
*but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.*
- 10 A little while, and the wicked will be no more;  
though you look for them, they will not be found.
- 11 *But the meek will inherit the land*  
and enjoy great peace.

“Inherit the earth”; “possess the land”; “enjoy prosperity and peace.” Notice the parallel between verse 11, “*the meek will inherit the land,*” and verse 9, “*those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.*” In other words, the meek are those who trust in God. Sounds like the first beatitude, doesn’t it, the “poor in spirit,” those who know they need God, and like the second, “those who mourn,” who are sorry for their sins. They will inherit all the promises of the kingdom. Fulfillment doesn’t come from grabbing all you can in life, but being humble, empty, and gentle, so God call fill you.

The Apostle Paul says the same thing in Ephesians 5 when he talks about the God-saturated life. He describes what it’s like to be filled with the Spirit:

Always give thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:20-21)

He's saying, pleasing God comes down to two things: being grateful; and humbly serving people around you. Paul goes on,

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called in all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love. (Ephesians 4:1–2)

And again,

Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in lowliness count each other better than yourselves. (Philippians 2:3)

That doesn't mean God wants us to be doormats. It isn't weak, but strength under control. It's like if you go to Giant Eagle at rush hour, and the checkout lines wrap around the store, but you only need to buy a pack of batteries. Then someone takes pity on you and says, "Here, go ahead of me if that's all you have." That person isn't a doormat—they're sure of their place in line! It's what Paul is getting at: put someone ahead of you in line. That's what the Christian life is about—living in the power of the Spirit for the benefit of others.

When I read Psalm 37, I left out verse four. It reads,

Delight yourself in the LORD  
and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psalm 37:4)

Do you see? God's giving us a portrait of meekness, of a character that pleases him. I think there are four characteristics that come out of Psalm 37.

First, they who wait on the Lord (verse 7)

They find God can be trusted. He will defend their cause, uphold their reputation. To be meek is to be confident that God is for you. It means you know God's in control, and you can be quiet in the midst of chaos. It doesn't depend on how the stock market is doing. You can be at peace, and you can wait.

Second, they trust the Lord (verse 3).

They know they're imperfect, and that's okay; they have a great big God who can hold them up. It's not about being a self-made person, but being a God-made person, not self-confident but God-confident.

Third, they commit their way to the Lord (verse 5).

Those are the ones who inherit the earth, and that's just another way of saying the desires of your heart. How can that be? Simple. Because when you desire Jesus above all else, he will fill the desire of your heart, and give himself in abundance.

Last, they don't fret over evil people (verse 1, 7b).

They know they're in god's hands, so they wait for his justice to work itself out; when others do wrong, we don't have to respond in poisonous and angry ways. We can refrain from revenge and bitterness. That's what James is talking about when he wrote,

Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. (James 1:19-21)

His word saves our souls when we trust it with meekness. And God "who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32) All things! Jesus won't hold anything back when we trust him. "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth."