



TAMED BY GRACE

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 5:5
Third Message
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G.K. Chesterton defined a paradox as “truth standing on its head, calling for attention.” Certainly, this can be said of the teaching of Jesus: His words were salted with paradoxes. It was our Lord who said such things as: Giving is receiving; dying is living; losing is finding; least is greatest; poor is rich; weakness is strength, serving is ruling.

The beauty of a paradox is that it draws attention because it doesn't sound right to the ear. Nothing could be more true of the third beatitude of Jesus, to which we come this morning in our series on the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,” said Jesus. But isn't it the self-made, the self-sufficient, the intimidating who get everything on this earth? How are the meek going to inherit anything? Such thinking runs counter to the laws of nature and society. Look at the people who occupy the executive suites. They are the strong, the self-sufficient, the overbearing, the proud, the capable, the aggressive, the ambitious. Can there be any doubt that the world belongs to the John Waynes of society?

It was Rabbi Harold Kushner, watching his son die of progeria, an early aging disorder, who coined the phrase, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” But an equally perplexing question is, “Why do good things keep happening to bad people?” Some people get away with murder. They make their way through life fat, dumb and happy, and never seem to pay the consequences of their evil. Others can't get away with anything. Terrible, frustrating, costly things keep happening to them, and we wonder why.

Meekness is the last thing anyone wants to be known for in our world. But that is because we don't understand meekness at all. We need to say at once that meekness is not weakness, cowardice, timidity, or a desire for peace at any price. Meekness is not indecisiveness or a lack of confidence. It is not shyness, having a withdrawn personality, or niceness. Meekness is not sweetness. Clark Kent is not a good example of meekness. There was nothing mild about Jesus. In fact, he got quite angry at times.

The Greek term translated “meek,” or “gentle,” is very colorful. It is used in several ways in secular writing:

- A wild stallion that had been tamed and brought under control is described as being meek.
- Carefully chosen words that soothed strong emo-

tions are called meek words.

- Ointment that took the fever and sting out of a wound is called meek.
- In one of Plato's works, a child who asks a physician to be tender as he treats him uses this term.
- People who are polite, tactful and courteous and who treat others with respect, are called meek people.

So meekness includes such enviable qualities as having strength under control; being calm and peaceful in a heated atmosphere; emitting a soothing effect on people who may be angry or otherwise beside themselves, and displaying tact and courtesy that causes others to retain their dignity.

In the first two beatitudes, if poverty describes Christians' attitude toward themselves, and mourning their attitude toward sin, then meekness has to do with our attitude toward others. We are teachable, so we are not defensive when we are wronged.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that meekness denotes a humble and gentle attitude toward others, determined by a true estimate of ourselves. He points out that it is comparatively easy to be honest with ourselves before God and acknowledge that we are sinners in his sight. He goes on:

But how much more difficult it is to allow *other people* to say things like that about me. I instinctively resent it. We all of us prefer to condemn ourselves than to allow somebody else to condemn us. In other words, I am not prepared to allow other people to think or speak of me what I have just acknowledged before God that I am. There is a basic hypocrisy here; there always is when meekness is absent. . . Meekness is essentially a true view of oneself, expressing itself in attitude and conduct with respect to others...The man who is truly meek is the one who is truly amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do. This makes him gentle, humble, sensitive, patient in all his dealings with others.

Meekness is a non-defensive position, a refusal to defend yourself and retaliate when you are unjustly accused.

Taking things into our own hands always makes matters worse. Of course, it is not wrong to defend the rights of others. Meekness is not standing by when other people's rights are trampled upon. Meekness is a re-

luctance to be quick to defend ourselves.

E. F. Finley writes:

True meekness is seen in those who with an acute sense of wrong, control the natural impulse to show anger and to retaliate, because in obedience to the will of God they accept provocation or wrong as discipline; and as opportunity for showing a spirit of patience and love. Meekness is the power of love to quell anger, to restrain a violent and hasty temper. The irritation may be keenly felt, the temptation to retaliate may be very strong, but love keeps the upper hand, and imposes discipline and self restraint.

So meekness involves a determination not to defend yourself when your rights are being taken away. What should you do? Let God defend you! Peter describes Jesus' actions in these words: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." Jesus did not retaliate. He didn't answer back when he was unjustly accused. He took everything that was hurled at him, entrusting himself to the One who judges justly.

So, given the fact that we are not to retaliate, and that bad things keep happening to people who want to do what is right, what should our response be to the inequities of life? Jesus took this third beatitude from Psalm 37, a psalm written by David in his latter years: "I have been young, and now I am old" (verse 25). This is wisdom that has been tempered by time. Years of hard experience had given David insight, integrity and balance. He is looking back and reflecting on his experiences in the wilderness. In these verses we see the central elements that ought to govern our thinking as we brood over the inequities of life. David tells us what works when life does not.

The poet begins with two negative commands. First, he says, "Do not fret." Actually, the word "fret" is repeated three times in the first eleven verses:

Do not fret because of evil men, (Ps 37:1, NIV)
do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes (7).
do not fret—it leads only to evil (8).

"Fret" means worry. But the word David uses here literally means "to get hot"—to get steamed, incensed. All these English words convey the idea of getting hot. That is what injustice does to us: it makes us mad; it bugs us. We don't like it when people misunderstand our intentions; when they misrepresent us; when they drag our names through the mud; when we give an honest day's labor and are not appreciated. Others pilage and cut corners, living for themselves, cheating and stealing and getting away with it. And that's not right. It should not be that way. It makes us mad. But,

David says, "Don't get mad"

Secondly, he says, "Don't be envious."

Or be envious of those who do wrong; (1b)

Don't be envious of wrongdoers. Envy is the sense of discontent we feel when we see the ungodly enjoying success. Unfortunately, most of our efforts to try and set things right in society are driven not so much by compassion as they are by envy and jealousy. We see evil people enjoying the good things of life—and we want them, too. If we don't get them, we feel short changed.

Don't envy the wicked, and don't get angry when evil people get away with wickedness.

David tells us why, in verse 2:

For like the grass they will soon wither,
Like green plants they will soon die away. (2)
For evil men will be cut off, (9a)

That verb "cut off" occurs frequently throughout this Psalm. It is one of David's major themes (verses 9, 22, 28-29, 34, 38). The opposite of being cut off is inheriting the land, or as Jesus expands it in the third beatitude, the "earth."

David uses a colorful metaphor in verses 35-36:

I have seen a wicked and ruthless man
Flourishing like a green tree in its native soil.
But then I passed by and lo, he was no more;
Though I looked for him, he could not be found.

David sees a beautiful, luxuriant tree putting out fruit. But the next day it is gone. Someone has cut it down. That is what is going to happen to the wicked.

If people do not get what is coming to them in this life, at death they will face judgment. While we may see tyrants getting away with things, no one really gets away with anything. All in all, we live in a very fair world, *because death brings an end to everything*. The wicked *seem* to be flourishing; everything seems good about their lives, but then a coronary strikes and they are cut down. God has a way of taking care of those who seem to be getting away with evil. So don't get angry, and don't be envious.

There is a vivid contrast in the Psalm between those who are defenseless, and therefore are defended by God, and the arrogant, those who look out for themselves. The arrogant will be cut off; but those who wait for the Lord will inherit the land. So David says, why get angry and worked up over the evil of those who trample on us and misuse us? God has a way of dealing with evildoers. In time, they will be cut down, but the righteous will endure forever. This long range view gives us balance.

But the question remains, What about the here and now? How do we face evildoers? David responds with four positive commands, the first of which is in verse 3:

Trust in the Lord and do good;

Dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. (3)

In Hebrew poetry, the second line intensifies the first and elaborates it. Here, the second line helps us understand what David means by “trust.” He is saying, settle down; dwell in the land; be content with your lot, and trust evildoers into God’s hand. We don’t have to redress all the evil in the world. Of course, we ought to do what we can when we see someone being oppressed; that is the response of Christian compassion. But we don’t have final responsibility to take ourselves out of the hands of evildoers.

That does not mean that we allow ourselves to be unnecessarily abused or misused by others. We can speak up and say it is not right to treat human beings that way. But when all is said and done, we must ultimately trust God to work out the final result. Then we don’t have to worry about it. We can safely put people in God’s hands and leave the outcome to him. That leaves us free to go about doing the right thing, knowing that God will deal with the fellow who is doing wrong.

Our natural tendency, however, is to want to set things right, to get the person who did wrong and make him pay for it. This is what happens in marriages. One spouse wrongs the other, sometimes grievously, and the wronged partner vows to get even. He or she withdraws conjugal rights, or pouts, to get back at the erring spouse. David says we should put the one who has wronged us in God’s hands. It is far better to say, “What you are doing is wrong, and you are answerable to God. But I am answerable to God, too, and I will do what is right, no matter what it costs me.” That is what David means when he says, “Trust in the Lord and do good.” He reinforces this later when he says, “Do not fret, it only leads to evildoing.” When we get angry, we are inclined to wrong people. But when we put people into God’s hands, and let him deal with them in his time and in his way, then we are free to be more charitable. We can be courteous, gentle and loving, because we know that God will deal with the matter.

There is nothing harder on our psyches than trying to redress all the wrongs in our lives and seeking to set things right. All that does is leave us with a bad feeling, a bad taste in our mouths. It takes away our joy. It is far better to put evildoers in God’s hands and go on about the business of doing what he has called us to do: Trust and obey.

David’s second positive command is in verse 4:

Delight yourself in the Lord; And he will give you the desires of your heart. (4)

We can’t push anger out of our minds (at least, I can’t). We can only displace it. Instead of obsessing about the wrong that has been done to you, preoccupy yourself with what is good. “Delight yourself in the Lord,” says David. Taste, and see that he is good.

Have you ever delighted yourself in something sweet? Chocolate lovers know what I am talking about.

That is what we need to do with the Lord. Remind yourself of his goodness. Relish him. Ponder his mercy, his grace, his kindness toward you. “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart,” says the psalmist. Certain of the desires that we have are legitimate, but joy and pleasure are simply by-products. When pursued directly, they elude us. All we can do is pursue things that we think will give us joy. At times, to our frustration, others take away the thing that we imagine will give us joy. But David is saying that if we delight in the Lord, if we relish him, if we hunger and thirst after him and taste his goodness, we will get the joy we sought.

Third, David says (verse 5):

Commit your way to the Lord; Trust in him and he will do this: (5)

The word for “commit” here is actually the verb “to roll.” It means to roll something away. The picture is one of a heavy, onerous burden. And injustice is a heavy burden. It weighs us down, taxes our strength and tires us out. David’s advice is, roll all of that on the Lord. He can handle it. We can’t bear up under injustice in the world. It will always wear us out, and we will end up doing something evil in response. David says, take all of that and roll the weight of your anxiety on God. Peter agrees. “Cast all your care upon him because he cares about you,” says the apostle.

And finally, David says, “Rest in the Lord” (verse 7):

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.

“Be still” means, be at rest, be tranquil. Compose your soul; settle your heart and wait. That word “wait” is interesting. It means to wait with longing. Hope encompasses the notion of expectancy, of longing for something. We must rest, and wait for God to work out his purposes. The writer of Hebrews says that it is through faith and patience that we inherit the promises. Trust and time are always factors.

But that’s hard, isn’t it? We want swift answers to our needs. But God is always working on a grander scale than our immediate needs. He has purposes in mind that we never envision. He is shaping us into the people that he intends us to be throughout eternity—and he uses present unpleasantness and long term injustice to accomplish that end. Our Lord himself, though he was a son, learned obedience through the things which he suffered.

Verse 11, the centerpiece of the Psalm, is where Jesus takes the beatitude from:

But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace. (11)

Meekness is non-defensiveness. As a matter of fact, in most situations people are defenseless. But meekness is a refusal to defend ourselves. We can explain ourselves, but when all is said and done, we cannot really protect ourselves. All we can do is put ourselves in God’s hands and ask him to protect us. That is the meek man

who is being guarded by God: He doesn't defend himself.

David says the meek "will inherit the land." Jesus expands that statement to mean the whole "earth," not just that land of Canaan as David envisioned, but everything that God has in mind for us. Our "inheritance" is all the good things that are promised for us in our relationship with God.

There is a beautiful illustration of meekness in Genesis 13, the story of Abraham (or Abram as he was known then) and Lot. Abraham was enriched while he was in Egypt. His herds were so vast that the land could not sustain both flocks. We pick up the story in Genesis 13:7:

And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time.

So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left."

Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. (Gen 13:7-11, NIV)

Lot "chose for himself." Remember that Abraham owned the whole land. He was the promised one. He had the covenant; he could have pulled rank; Lot was nothing more than a hitchhiking relative. And Abraham was the older man. He had the right to tell Lot to get lost. But he let Lot choose, and Lot "chose for himself." Abraham let God choose for him, and he got the whole thing. Lot lost everything in the end, while Abraham got everything. He inherited the land forever. Someone said, "Lot was looking for grass, and Abraham was looking for grace."

Moses goes on (verse 14):

The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever." (13:14-15)

Abraham let God choose and the patriarch got everything. His inheritance represents everything that is ours in Christ. The picture of Abraham walking the length and the breadth, all the dimensions of the land, is reminiscent of what Paul says about our inheritance in Christ, in Ephesians, "I want you to know the height and the depth and the width of the love of Christ." That is our inheritance.

So what if evil people have everything in this world. So what if they take our goods away from us. The nearness of God is our good, and we have him forever, to enjoy him throughout eternity.

F.B. Meyer writes:

God honors those that honor Him. He withholds no good thing from them that walk uprightly. He meets him that rejoices and works righteousness. If only we will go on doing what is right, giving up the best to others to avoid dispute, considering God's interest first and our own last; expending ourselves for the coming and glory of the kingdom of heaven; we shall find that God shall charge himself with our interest. And he will do infinitely more for us that we could.

Lot had to ask the men of Sodom if he might sojourn among them; he had no hold on the land. But it was all given, unasked, to Abraham, including the verdant circle upon which Lot had set his heart.

That is the majesty of meekness: bearing patiently the spiteful attacks of malice and envy; overcoming evil with good; living in the midst of difficult people and loving them; keeping our mouths shut and our hearts open when we're in the presence of detractors, and remaining unruffled and composed through a storm of unkindness and misrepresentation.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

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