

Foundations: The Third Blessing Matthew 5:5 (AFBC 9/23/18)

If you've been with us the last couple of Sundays, you're aware that so far in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has pronounced blessings on "the poor in spirit" and "those who mourn."

Honestly, most of us would not likely choose to be or do either of those things, except for the fact that Jesus told us we should. And today's blessing doesn't get much better—at least not in the sense of being something that we would just naturally aspire to.

Meekness? How many parents here today set it as one of your goals to raise children who are "meek?" I've attended many commencement ceremonies, but I've never heard a graduation speaker encourage his listeners to strive toward "meekness!"

Maybe we need a better understanding of what the word MEANS. Meek is not seen as a positive word. People don't want to be labeled as "meek."

Some among us here, if referred to in this way, might well respond with something like, "I'll show you who's MEEK!" Those are "fightin' words!" I guess we need to know our Bibles better. In Scripture, MEEK is a good word—Old Testament and New.

In **Psalm 37:11**, for example, we read, "**But the meek shall possess the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.**" Actually, that sounds a lot like what Jesus said.

But that can't be right. The meek get run over by others and end up with little or nothing! That's how we see it—except maybe... when we're in church.

Hear it is again, though. "The meek shall possess the land..." or as Jesus said, "the meek will inherit the earth!" The Greek word in the New Testament can be translated either as "meek" or "gentle." It literally means "strength that has been brought under control."

Some of you know that our family had a couple of horses when I was a kid. Actually, we started out with one horse, but we bred her and got a second horse. A few Easter's ago, I told you that we named the foal *Dawn's Surprise*, because she arrived at dawn—and we weren't expecting her that day. She surprised us!

Well, that little horse had it made. My sister and I “loved on” that little foal and brushed her and fed her and walked her around the pasture. She got lots of attention. Little did she know that one day, we would get on her back. That came as a rude surprise!

The responsibility for introducing her to the concept of horseback riding fell to me. We took Dawn over to my granddaddy’s pasture—it was much larger than ours. Dawn was full-grown now—close enough—big and powerful, and ready to be ridden—from our perspective; but she didn’t seem to agree with that.

With great care, I placed the saddle on her back and tightened the cinch strap. She flinched and kicked a little, but didn’t seem to be too bothered. First, I led her around the pasture by the halter, and she settled into that rather well.

But next came the bridle! You would have thought I was giving her a root canal. She clinched her teeth and tried to spit out the bit. She fought that thing for all she was worth. But... we finally got her bridled.

Then came the moment I had been waiting for since the day she came into the world. I was going to ride her! As Dad and one of his cousins held her tight, I got on Dawn’s back. I assured them I knew just what to do—after all, I had seen rodeos on TV!

They steadied her as I took the reins. Then, on the count of three, they let go and quickly got out of the way—maybe too quickly. And that’s when the fun began.

Dawn took off, using a gait like nothing I had ever experienced before. She went forward and up and down--all at the same time. It was part running and part bucking, and I was holding on for dear life. Somehow I managed to hang on.

It really didn’t take her too long to realize, though, that the bit in her mouth was a lot more comfortable when she was not running or bucking or trying to unload the load on her back. Before the day was over, she was already beginning to get the hang of it.

A horse can be a dangerous animal. You and I are no match for its power and speed. But when that horse is trained, when it’s under the control of the bit and reins, when it’s learned to obey the commands of its master, it’s said to be “praos,” in the Greek,

which means “meek,” and “gentle.” Or, more fully, it means “strength that has been brought under control.”

Jesus is teaching us here that we need this quality in our lives, and that it leads to the blessing He calls “inheriting the earth”—the meek will inherit the earth. What’s that about?

Well, it may refer to that time out in the future when the Bible says there will be a new heaven and a new earth, and Jesus Christ will King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and we will be His joint-heirs—something out in God’s future, in other words.

Or, this may refer to the fact that when we are truly meek and submissive toward God, we become more open to all the blessings of His creation. The whole earth is ours to appreciate and enjoy in a fresh new way once our lives are under His control.

Either way, I think most of us like that part about inheriting the earth! It’s the meekness part that we struggle with. Again, we don’t want to be meek! We value assertiveness and boldness—for some, downright meanness, it seems—but not meekness.

I heard about a fellow who went into a restaurant and ordered a steak. Now, a little disclaimer: this is nobody you know. Any resemblance to your spouse is purely coincidental. Anyway, this man orders his steak “well-done.”

When the waitress brings it to the table, he cuts into it and finds that it’s cooked “rare” at best. “Waitress,” he says loudly, “take this bloody steak back and cook it!” Moments later, she returns. This time, though, he says its too done—burnt to a crisp! He demands another steak.

She comes back a third time and sets the meal in front of him. The steak suits him this time, but as he cuts into the potato, he yells, “Waitress, this is a bad potato!”

The waitress is no longer smiling. She takes the man’s fork and pokes it into that potato. She raises it into the air and says “Bad potato, bad, bad, bad.” Then she plops it back down on the man’s plate, and walks away!

I don’t guess either of them passed the meekness test on that occasion! Whoever you feel was right or wrong, either one of them

could have chosen to be more gentle and under control in how they responded.

The potential for meekness was there—but they chose NOT to be meek. This is important. Meekness is not a character trait that some people have and some don't.

It's not the same as shyness or quietness or an "excuse me for living" approach to life. That's not what being meek is all about.

Jesus is called "meek" in the Bible; but is your image of Jesus someone who is shy? I mentioned last Sunday that Jesus did not just teach the beatitudes, He embodied them. This is another case in point.

Jesus was meek, but I doubt that the Pharisees would have described Him that way, after some of the verbal confrontations Jesus had with them. The money changers in the Temple didn't think of Jesus as meek when He swung a rope at them and turned their tables upside down. Was He meek only sometimes?

I don't think so. Jesus consistently demonstrated what He means by meekness and how He wants you and me to live out this quality in our lives. Being meek doesn't mean that you're a wallflower, that you never take a stand or ever get angry and raise your voice.

It does mean, however, that you let a lot of opportunities to respond in those ways to simply pass by—in other words, you don't get angry, or raise your voice, or take some kind of bold or vindictive action every time someone rattles your cage.

Are you confused? I warned you that Jesus is not spoon-feeding us here. The Christian life is not a quick study. To understand it at all, Jesus must be our Teacher. And He intends for us to keep learning and growing over the course of a lifetime!

Listen to this invitation to us from Jesus: **"Take My yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle (meek) and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."** 'Let me be your teacher--learn from ME...,' Jesus says, 'for My yoke is easy and my burden, light.'

Isn't it interesting that the YOKE that Jesus mentions here is yet another way to tame a horse—or an ox or mule--and get it to do what you need for it to do. In Jesus' day, younger animals were

often hitched to other older animals by using a "training yoke." The training yoke had openings for both animals.

The heavier end of the yoke was placed on the neck of the older animal, the one that already knew what to do. The lighter end was carried by the younger animal, so all it really had to do was keep pace and not go off in the wrong direction. So, for the animal in training: "IT'S yoke was easy, and it's burden light."

Are you seeing this? Jesus wants to be OUR teacher. Jesus can break through our wildness and stubbornness and focus our lives, our strengths, and energies in the right directions so we can then live blessed, happy, and productive lives.

Our Lord doesn't jump on our backs and ride us until we're broken. Instead, He yokes us to Himself. He carries our burden for us, while we learn from Him and follow His lead.

In the process, we discover how to be MEEK, and gentle and kind. Now, follow this: the potential to kick and buck and run wild and hurt people in the process is still in each one of us. As Christians, we still have the capacity to be mean, rude, and confrontational. We can still harm people through our words and actions.

We're no less powerful than we were before. But now we're yoked to Jesus, and we're discovering that God has other plans for our lives. And we're learning day by day a better way to live, a better way to relate to God and to one another.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle talked about meekness. He saw it as an important virtue. Aristotle defined meekness as the middle ground between two extremes.

On the one side was excessive anger; and on the other side, was the inability to be angry at all. The meek person was one who found the proper balance—not a hot head, nor a wimp, but some middle ground between those two extremes.

From what we see in the life of Jesus, though, I believe meekness has more to do with what it is that makes us angry. Followers of Jesus are to be angry at the right things for the right reasons, and we avoid allowing insignificant things to make us angry. The motivations for our anger should never be something selfish.

When Jesus got angry, it was over how someone else was being treated. It wasn't motivated by what was happening to Him. This is what Jesus wants to teach us. It's how He wants us to live.

Now, Jesus WILL get on OUR backs when it comes to our haughty spirits, our out-of-control ambitions, our vanity and pride—just as He did with the Pharisees. THEY could be stubborn as mules—TOO! Jesus has to break and bring under control that kind of self-centeredness that allows no room for meekness.

This has always been the case. The Apostle Paul gets real honest when he describes himself as being proud and pompous, a Pharisee of Pharisees--regarding the law, faultless—Paul's proud of himself until Jesus breaks him there on the Damascan road.

As a Pharisee, Paul says he was "the best." As an Apostle of Jesus Christ, though, he calls himself... "the least." Same tremendous strengths and gifts and abilities as before, but now tamed and under Christ's control. Paul has found the blessing of meekness.

Christian meekness has two dimensions. It begins in submission to God's will for our lives. We choose to be yoked to Jesus Christ—to make Him Lord.

This relationship with the Savior, then, has a profound effect on how we relate to one another. The insecurities and jealousies and ambitions that once kept us so anxious and frazzled and quick to lash out at others are tamed now by the grace and love of Jesus.

I want to tell you about a young woman who taught me about meekness. The year was 1978. Contemporary Christian music was in its infancy.

There was a popular group called "Genesis" composed of fifteen vocalists and instrumentalists. They were touring the country and the student government association at Southeastern Seminary invited them to come to the school and do a concert.

It was my job to extend the invitation to the group, and since I was serving a church as Minister of Music and Youth, I got permission to make it two invitations. They would do a concert at the church on Sunday evening and then sing for chapel at the seminary on Monday. It was a wonderful opportunity for the church to host a group that they would not normally be able to afford.

All we had to do was house them for the night and feed them a couple of meals. The rest of their expenses were covered. The church was so excited about having this group of young people—that is, until I started putting up the posters.

Again, it was 1978; and there was an African-American girl in the group. Next thing I knew, the Deacons called me in to say that some folks were upset, and I would have to un-invite the group.

I stayed calm while asking them if they wanted me to tell them they couldn't come because of her. "Oh, no," they said. Then, do you want me to call them and lie? "Nooooo..."

Then I launched into an impromptu sermon. It included Jesus and Peter and Paul and "whosoever will may come!"

When I finished, the Deacons asked me to leave the room, and I was fully prepared to go clean out my office. But instead, after a long deliberation, they called me back in and said they had decided to let the group come, and they would take the heat for it.

I told the group what had happened—I felt they needed to know. It was not the first time they had encountered this attitude. During the concert, the young woman shared her testimony—beautifully!

She concluded with this: "Sometimes I get discouraged. I feel like I'm being persecuted or looked down on because of the color of my skin. But then I remember my Lord and how He was persecuted and how much He suffered when He died for me. Then I don't feel persecuted anymore. I just feel grateful. What I have to face is nothing in comparison to what He faced.

And then she used her incredible voice to sing, "To God Be the Glory." People knew the circumstances, and they were in tears. A few mules got hit between the eyes with two-by-fours that night, without a single board being lifted. It was a break-through moment for the grace of God in that church.

Meekness—submission to God and to others, even toward those who treated her badly! She had every reason to lash out, and the ability to do so. But she didn't. She was under Christ's control.

His Lordship made her meek and gentle and Christlike. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."