

“Blessed Are the Meek”
Part Four in a Series on the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 5:5

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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Growing up on the Great High Plains, I was fortunate to be part of a family of horse-lovers. At one time our family of five had seven horses. I know—a little excessive. Most of our disposable income—after the essentials of food, shelter, and clothing—went to the care and feeding of our beloved horses.

My father was known as something of a horse whisperer, long before the term was made popular by the famous 1998 Robert Redford movie.¹ My dad had a way with horses; he could ride horses that others couldn't—horses that threw other riders who had managed to climb into the saddle. Why was my father so successful with horses? He attributed his success to his approach to horse training. He didn't attempt to “break” them. He hated that word because of the approach to horse training it depicted. Breaking a horse's spirit, breaking it's will, was an anathema to him. Oh, horses that had been broken submitted to bit and saddle, but something was gone from their eyes. Seeing such beautiful animals with broken spirits greatly upset him.

Dad had a very different approach. When it came to training a horse to bit and saddle, he sought to create a willing and accepting partner in the horse. A human-horse partnership did not end with a horse broken in spirit, beaten down by violence and cowed by fear. Not at all. He would have agreed with Jeffery Rolo who wrote on the website *Alpha Horse*, “Ruling a horse by fear and abusive treatment is not only reprehensible by its very nature, it is also highly unnecessary as horses can easily become willing partners if shown kindness, patience and compassion.”² Such horses accept bit and saddle without fear or a broken spirit; the magnificent spark is still in their eyes. As a willing partner, the horse's mighty strength is brought under the rider's control, but willingly. A mere touch of the reigns or a shift in the saddle was all it took to direct a horse in the direction Dad wanted it to go. This productive horse-and-rider relationship resulted from the horse's great strength and energy being *willingly* controlled—not from a broken and fearful spirit.

The picture painted by my dad's approach to horse training can help us understand the third Beatitude, a Beatitude that can be difficult to comprehend in 21st century America.

“Blessed are the meek,” Jesus proclaimed. As with the other seven Beatitudes, the third Beatitude flies in the face of conventional societal expectations. In our culture, meekness is not seen as a virtue but rather as a character flaw. Meekness is to be avoided because we mistakenly understand meekness in terms of weakness. Our culture thinks of a meek person as being deficient in spirit and courage; someone who is timid and spineless and easily

intimidated; society perceives a meek person as a doormat who allows others to walk all over him or her.

The contemporary understanding of the word meek is quite different from the biblical understanding. The biblical writers describe three individuals as meek—Moses, Jesus, and Paul.³ When we think of their remarkable life stories, we wouldn't dare call these three individuals weak, or spineless, or deficient in spirit, or easily intimidated. They were quite the opposite of the timid cartoon character Caspar Milquetoast, if you are familiar with him.⁴ These towering giants in the biblical story accomplished amazing things while enduring tremendous hardships and opposition. Yet their great strength never failed to manifest itself in gentleness and humility because they had turned the reigns of their lives over to God.

This is what the Greek word in Matthew, *praus*, depicts. Meekness denotes not weakness, but its opposite: controlled strength. The meek person is one who has voluntarily surrendered the reigns of life to God, and God—I should point out—is a “human whisperer,” if I may coin a term. God does not seek to break our spirits by brute force; God does not use fear and intimidation to bend us to the divine will. On the contrary, God desires to create a willing partnership with us, like my dad did with his horses. God lovingly and persistently woos us into a divine-human partnership. Because a meek person is one who has willingly turned the reigns of life over to God, God uses those reigns to guide the disciple, helping him or her to make wise decisions, and to endure the inevitable hardships and obstacles which will confront all disciples. And a meek disciple of Christ displays this controlled strength with a calm and peaceful spirit that manifests itself in gentleness, humility, fortitude, and quiet confidence.

Yes, the biblical understanding of meekness stands our society's understanding on its head. And so does the promise associated with this Beatitude: “for they shall inherit the earth.”

That promise sounds ridiculous, but not just in our culture. No, it has been judged absurd in most human cultures. After all, everyone knows that only the aggressive, the forceful, the self-assertive, the covetous, the grasping—those willing to trample others underfoot by brute force—only these people get ahead in life. According to conventional wisdom, “that's just the way of the world; it's always been that way and always will be.” How, then, are we to interpret Jesus' promise that it is the meek who will inherit the earth?

To begin with, we need to realize that when Jesus uttered this Beatitude, he was quoting the first line of Psalm 37:11.

But the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

In the Bible “the land”—a reference to the promised land—belonged to God, not the people. Psalm 24:1 states this concept most eloquently:

The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it."

When the Israelites entered the promised land, technically they did not take possession of it; rather, God allocated portions of land to the various tribes, who were to be stewards of the land. Technically, a family's land could not be sold because it belonged to God; a family that fell on hard times could "lease" portions of the land to another person for a certain number of years, but every fiftieth year—the Year of Jubilee, the "year of the Lord's favor"—the land would revert back to the original family. This legal requirement that the land be returned to the original family—a redistribution of capital and wealth!—was to ensure that Israel would not become a land of "haves" and "have-nots," like all of the nations that surrounded Israel. No. Israel was to be holy, to be different; a light to the gentiles. Sadly, it was not long before this divine commandment stopped being enforced. Why? For the obvious reason: returning the land to the original families was not in the "interest" of the emerging class of "haves." Contrary to the Law of Moses, the "haves" began to claim that they owned the land; consequently, a growing class of "have-nots" began to emerge in Israel, contrary to God's will.

By the time of Jesus, Jewish society was quite different from the egalitarian society envisioned under the Mosaic legislation. Scholars estimate that 85% of the people fell into the peasant class, the majority of whom were tenant farmers—share croppers. That is, they worked the land, which was owed by a very small class of landowners. Two-thirds of what the peasants produced on the land was used to pay rent to their landlords and taxes to the ruler. During years of drought, these rents and taxes still needed to be paid, resulting in extreme hardships on those in the peasant class.

Would it surprise you to learn that the peasant class came to believe that when the long-awaited Messiah came, he would reestablish the Year of Jubilee so that the land would be redistributed as God had intended, doing away with a division between "haves" and "have-nots"?

Jesus came from the peasant class, although his family were artisans—carpenters—rather than farmers. (Artisans comprised about 5% of the peasant class.) Thus, he knew first-hand the suffering and hardships of the Jewish peasants. He also knew that this unjust social order—where most people lived at a subsistence level—had come about due to direct disobedience to the will of God as expressed in the Torah. And that is why, in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth recorded in Luke 4, Jesus characterized his ministry as a proclamation of the Year of Jubilee, "the year of the Lord's favor."⁵ He viewed his ministry as a direct attack on the unjust social order that had emerged. Is it any wonder that those in power—the "haves"—saw Jesus as a dangerous rabble-rouser and concluded that it was expedient that he be executed?

Yes, Jesus called for social revolution, but a *nonviolent* one. He said that the way of meekness—a deeply spiritual concept—would have an astonishing reward: that the meek will

“inherit the earth.” The word “inherit” conveys the idea of a gift, a legacy; thus, this gift comes to the meek precisely because they do not attempt to seize it by force.

This is a beautiful spiritual principle, but what does it mean for us today? Our industrial/high-tech society is quite different from the agrarian society of the biblical world. A redistribution of land today would do little to produce the egalitarian society envisioned in the Mosaic legislation.

I won’t attempt to suggest any specifics in this short sermon, but let me offer two broad lines of inquiry that I believe might prove fruitful if we were to pursue them.

First, no one in our congregation exists at a subsistence level—fortunately, few in our nation do. No, our national problem is that our so-called possessions often seem to possess us. Perhaps we could reflect on the words of Jesus and the remarkable lives of Christians like St. Francis and Tolstoy who renounced their possessions and found great spiritual freedom and happiness. Now, I’m not suggesting that we should literally consider taking a vow of poverty, but I am proposing that we reexamine our relationship to our “possessions” to be sure they don’t “possess” us. That is, that we could ponder the Quakers’ “Way of Simplicity” mentioned in my sermon two weeks ago.

Second, although few people exist at a subsistence level in our nation today, a shocking number of our fellow citizens do experience crushing poverty. Moreover, there exists today a rapidly growing chasm between the vast majority of Americans and a tiny minority that possesses most of the wealth. And when we move beyond the boundaries of the first-world countries of North America and Europe, the economic disparity intensifies. Both problems—poverty and growing inequality—are dangerous to our nation, our world, and are an affront to the will of God. Christians need to ponder how to deal with these complex problems.

But one thing I can say with certainty: as we prayerfully explore these two broad lines of inquiry, we must do so in a spirit of meekness—for only therein lies the promise of inheriting the earth.

And that’s today’s good news. Amen

¹ *The Horse Whisperer*, Robert Redford, director; (1998) based on the novel by Nick Evans.

² Jeffrey Rolo, “The Fatal Flaw Behind Horse Breaking,” Alpha Horse (web).

³ Moses (Num 12:3); Jesus (Matt 11:29, 21:5), and Paul (2 Co. 10:11).

⁴ Caspar Milquetoast was a comic strip character created in 1924 by the American cartoonist Harold T. Webster. The comic strip, called “The Timid Soul,” ran every Sunday in the *New York Herald Tribune* for many years.

⁵ Luke 4:18-19, 21.