

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when others succeed in their ways, when they carry out wicked schemes.... For evil people will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.... the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace. Psalm 37:7,9,11

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

....the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Matthew 20:28

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. II Timothy 1:7

Blessed are the Meek....

Jimmy Carter was elected President three months after Pam and I were married in 1976. We had quite a few new things to learn at that time – we were newlyweds in a new city, part-time youth ministers, Pam also a full-time assistant and receptionist in a graphic arts business, and I a part-time university student and part-time photographer. Despite all that, we still paid attention to what was happening in the world. I remember vividly a couple of things which impressed me from the early months of Carter's presidency. One was his **quotation of Micah 6:8** in his inaugural address to say that he lived with the constant awareness that **the Lord required him "to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God."** Another memory was the stir he caused in the press corps when he returned after a weekend at Camp David and would step off the Marine One helicopter carrying his own suit bag into the White House, rather than having a military attaché carry it. One other lasting impression came after Carter left office. He would show up at Habitat for Humanity construction sites to work all day alongside other volunteers to help provide housing for people who needed it, not just for a few minutes for a photo opportunity and publicity. He seemed to me to be a man living out Jesus' third Beatitude -- meekness.

The Ascending Stairway to Spiritual Life In Clarence Jordan's *Sermon on the Mount* stairway illustration of the Beatitudes, the journey begins when someone turns around (repents) to face the Light of the World instead of ignoring or fleeing from him. Seeing oneself in his Light reveals all the damage that has been done to the soul and life by God's enemy and by selfish sinfulness. That revelation prompts **poverty of spirit, the first step** of the journey towards God in which we admit our inability to save ourselves and our need for God's rescue and forgiveness. God's blessing of that admission is to grant those requests and welcome us into his kingdom of Light. Our movement closer to the Lord illuminates even more clearly the harm done by sin to ourselves and everything around us, leading logically to **the second Beatitude step of mourning** that damage. More than just a human emotion of sadness or sorrow, spiritual mourning is a concern so deep that it motivates us to take action to halt and repair sin's destructive impacts. God blesses our mourning with the comforting relief of his forgiveness, with assurance that life can be lived as he intends it to be, and with the deep desire to start living in cooperation with the One who made us, free of sin's harm. Preparing to act on that desire quickly shows us our need to take **the third step** on the stairway to spiritual life, the step of meekness (Matthew 5:5).

Meekness Defined A secular definition of meekness typically includes words describing **personality traits** like timid, mild-mannered, humble, submissive, not forceful, and unwilling to express opinions firmly. In many people's minds, **meekness translates to weakness** and describes a person who is considered "a doormat," someone easily manipulated or intimidated into compliance with something they would not choose on their own.

Blessed Meekness The meekness which Jesus said is blessed, however, illustrates the "upside-down kingdom" opposite of the world's definition. Jesus himself is undoubtedly the best and truest example of meekness to be found. He abandoned himself to the will of his Father. In multiple situations and multiple places in the Gospels, he told listeners that he was bound to doing "the will of him who sent me." Clarence Jordan describes Jesus' meekness as the result of **having fully surrendered his human will to the eternal will of God**, and having done that so completely that God's will became his will. He was ready to do his Father's bidding. It was that consistent surrender which prompted Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane shortly before his arrest that "not what I will, but what you will" be done.

The blessedness of meekness for Jesus came in the knowledge that his obedient atoning sacrifice and resurrection would accomplish by grace for all humankind what he knew his Father longed for -- their reconciliation and opportunity of eternal life in God's presence. It could never happen by human will, human calculation, or human power. It could only be accomplished by voluntarily yielding those human strengths to the Divine power who created them. Catholic theologian Richard Rohr calls it "**the unique power of powerlessness.**" Paul wrote of that reality in Philippians 2:5-11, that although he was God, Jesus surrendered his status, "made himself nothing," and humbled himself to being executed on a cross, knowing that the outcome would be every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that he was indeed the Messiah, and that he had told them the truth about God. In that same way, the blessedness of submitting our will to God's will allows him to provide for us all the things in life that will bring fulfillment and joy, and to spare us the futility of chasing after worldly prizes that can never meet that need.

Meekness as a Choice Just as mourning is a chosen action, not a human emotion, **spiritual meekness also is a choice** (or the byproduct of a choice), **not a human personality trait**. That choice is to heed Christ's call to

discipleship, to abandon self-will and to yield to God's will in all things. It is to answer Jesus' call that "if any would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). One of the results of that decision will be spiritual meekness, **the total surrender of self-will to God's will**. That meekness will include aspects of the first two beatitudes (admitted need for God, sorrow over sin's damage), of the fruit of the Spirit's presence (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – Galatians 5:22), and of the power of the Holy Spirit's leading (Acts 1:8). Paul took care to caution that spiritual meekness does not present as timidity (II Timothy 1:7).

Meekness as Teachability In *Following the Call*, author Elizabeth Elliott wrote that meekness is an essential component of the spiritual journey because it enables us to be taught. Following Christ means seeking his perspective and intentions about everything in life. That is a lifelong project because the subject matter is infinite, and because the world and its needs are constantly changing. **Meekness keeps us at the feet of Christ, our Present Teacher**, to be reminded of how much we still have to learn, and to gain wisdom and understanding from him for dealing with the new challenges of each new day. Elliott highlights the importance of meekness also for willingness to lay down religious and cultural preconceptions in order to learn Truth and be corrected or helped or changed. It is wise to be cautious of any who claim to have figured out the spiritual life and say they have nothing left to learn.

Meekness as Courageous Witness Clarence Jordan names Moses (Exodus 7-10, Numbers 12:3), Jesus (Matthew 27:11-14), and the arrested apostles (Acts 5:29, "we must obey God, not men") as three of his favorite examples of spiritual meekness because of their **fearless confrontations with human power**, made possible by the surrender of their own wills to that of God. While most of us will never have opportunity to witness to people as powerful as Pharaoh, Pilate, or the Sanhedrin, the principle still applies today. We must quiet self-will to allow God to lead us into uncomfortable or even risky situations for Truth. Once there, the meek who are surrendered to the Lord will surprise the powerful by both their courageous words and their self-disciplined silence, whichever God chooses to give them.

Meekness as Costly Love Elizabeth Elliott writes too that Jesus is our supreme example of spiritual meekness and points to the foot-washing which took place in John 13 as the Last Supper began. We often hear about Peter's objection to letting Jesus wash his feet (and Jesus' mild rebuke of him for that). What we don't often think about is that Jesus washed all the disciples' feet, including those of Judas Iscariot. Elliott encourages us to **try to imagine the look on Jesus' face as he in wounded love bathed the feet of Judas** who he knew would betray him after the meal to have him killed the next day. She also wonders what sort of nonverbal communication happened between Jesus and Peter, with Jesus knowing Peter would deny their friendship three times the next morning. And still, he knelt before them, removed their sandals, and washed away the desert dust.

Meekness as a Matter of Rights In the Kenosis passage in Philippians 2:5-11, Paul makes it clear that Jesus as our Creator in human flesh, as the Son of God, had all the rights of the One who created and sustains everything that exists. That included the right to destroy the people who were about to kill him, thus sparing himself the agony of a cruel death. **Jesus chose not to exercise that right, but instead entrusted it to his Father** and went ahead to suffer, die, and rise again to accomplish salvation for each of us who will believe his message. He leaves a perfect example of spiritual meekness for us. We are to love God and desire his will "to be done on earth as it is in heaven" so deeply that we gladly acknowledge that "we are not our own, but have been bought with a price" (I Corinthians 6:19-20). We gladly choose to entrust our rights into God's hands and live joyfully the life he provides us, both now and in eternity.

Meekness in Daily Life In 1985, Pam and I met a European Quaker who had lived in Kenya for many years. He was a university professor in Nairobi, and we got the impression that he was **well-known and highly respected among academics all across the region**. He also was a leader in one of the Friends Meetings in the city. After he learned we were Quakers, he invited us to attend the meeting for worship there. On Sunday, he picked us up about an hour before the service began and took us to the meetinghouse before anyone else had arrived. He showed us around, then had us take a seat on the wooden benches in the meeting room. He left for a moment, then reappeared with a broom and spent the next 20 minutes sweeping the room's floor, finishing up just as other worshipers began arriving. We both were moved and blessed by that highly-educated, highly-esteemed Friend's **choice to perform a menial but necessary chore** for the benefit and comfort of the other Kenyans and expatriates who gathered in worship there. It was spiritual meekness.

In my own spiritual life, the first three Beatitudes are in use all the time. No matter what dilemma or challenge arises, I quiet myself to admit my need for God's help and to remember that he's in charge. I then mourn whatever about the situation is not as the Lord intends it, continuing in mourning until the concern is deep enough to motivate corrective action. Then as I contemplate what action to take, in meekness I surrender to God my right to fix anything until I have waited and listened for his Spirit's leading. When it comes, his solution is always far superior to mine. The Beatitude's promise is true!

--Ron Ferguson, 11 February 2024

Queries for Worship-Sharing and Reflection

- 1) Why is meekness so often assumed to mean weakness, timidity, or "doormat personality" nowadays?
- 2) What are the differences between "surrendering one's rights" and "surrendering one's rights to God"?

- 3) How difficult do you think it was for Jesus, knowing what he knew, to wash Judas' feet? Is "wounded love" accurate?
- 4) Describe an example of spiritual meekness you've witnessed in your life. Why is it sometimes hardest in everyday life?