

THE MEEK INHERIT THE EARTH

a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, August 21, 2016

based on Psalm 103:1-5, Ephesians 1:3-12

Today is the conclusion of a summer sermon series entitled, “Bless You—experiencing God’s blessing in a world full of challenge.” We began this series by noting that the Biblical idea of blessing is rooted in God’s call to Abraham, where God says, “I will bless you . . . so that you will be a blessing, and in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:2-3) From this beginning, we noted three key ideas that have continued to recur throughout this sermon series. First, to be blessed does not mean that everything for you is just dandy. To be blessed is to be in fellowship with God even when times are tough. Abraham was called to launch into a very challenging journey, but he journeyed with God. Secondly, the blessed life is not one in which you are just sitting back enjoying lots of nice stuff. The truly blessed life is one in which you become a blessing for others. The central promise to Abraham was that he would be a blessing and that through him and his descendants the whole world would be blessed. Finally, blessing comes by the gift of God. Abraham did not make himself blessed. It was God’s action that brought him into blessing. Likewise it is God’s action through Jesus Christ, received by us in faith, that brings us into blessing today.

All these themes are exemplified to the utmost in the life and teaching Jesus; and as this sermon series progressed, we turned our attention especially to Jesus’ central teaching about blessing in the Beatitudes—eight “blessed are” sayings with which Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount. We conclude the series today by looking at a key Beatitude that is often overlooked, perhaps because people are unsure of its meaning: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:5) Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Blessed are the meek. We don’t want to be meek, because we think that being meek means being a wimp. We want to be strong and bold, and we want our nation to be strong and bold. Our model is the Olympic athlete, who steps forth with a determination to win. So our culture encourages us to be aggressive and assertive, to stand up for ourselves, and not to put up with any disrespect. If being meek means being weak or timid, then we struggle to make sense of Jesus’ teaching, because it certainly does not seem that the meek inherit the earth. It appears that the strong and bold inherit the earth, while the meek get shoved aside.

Here it is helpful first of all to look at the actual meaning of the original Greek word in Matthew’s gospel. The Greek word translated as “meek” is the word “praus.” One way that people used this word in the first century was with reference to domesticated animals. Consider, for example, a pit bull, with fangs bared and growling. This dog is not “praus.” On the other hand, consider a golden retriever, looking attentively to its master, ready to spring into action when a ball or a stick is thrown. This dog is “praus” or meek. Likewise a good horse was described as “praus” or meek. Clearly, a good golden retriever or a horse is no wimp. These are powerful animals capable of decisive and bold action. The word “praus” or “meek”

meant not that an animal was cowardly or weak; it meant that the animal was disciplined, that it was obedient to its master, that it was well disposed, and that it had a gentle rather than a vicious spirit.

So a meek person is not one who is weak or cowardly. A meek person is one who is self-disciplined, who looks with attentiveness to God, and who responds to other people with gentleness and good will, which generally requires more inner strength than responding with bitterness or rage. The prime Biblical example of meekness is Jesus; indeed Jesus described Himself as meek, when He said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart." (Matt. 11:29) Jesus clearly was not weak, cowardly, or timid—He stood firmly and boldly for the truth of God—yet at the same time we can see in Jesus all the traits of true meekness: a gentleness of spirit, a faithfulness to God's will, a self-restraint in the face of insult, and a style of responding to others not with lashing out but with a desire to lift others up.

Yet even when we understand meekness correctly, being meek runs against the grain of our human nature. To see just how meek we are, look at how we respond on the highway when someone cuts us off. Whenever people aggravate and offend us, it can be a challenge to respond with a steady, gentle, and Christ-like spirit. Yet it is precisely at this point that Christ can work with transformative power in our lives.

I read an article about a gathering in Germany of Christian bikers, who came rumbling up on their motorcycles to the Brandenburg Gate, the central German monument in Berlin. There they had a worship service that included a biker version of the Beatitudes. It read in part as follows, "Blessed are the meek, who do not use their horsepower as a weapon, and the peacemakers, who behave themselves on the highway."

There is power in Christ to give new shape to our daily lives. Our natural human tendency is to grab for what we think we need, and, whenever someone irritates us, to strike back in anger. But Jesus would lead us in the way of meekness—to devote ourselves in humility to God, and to respond to aggravation with patience, good will, and a trust that God's purpose will ultimately prevail. How much do we need a spirit of meekness in our personal lives, and far more, in the whole world!

Our daily news is full of people who are fighting for position and striking out in anger, and we regularly see world leaders and groups acting with the very opposite of meekness. Look at Vladimir Putin, or North Korea's Kim Jong-un, or China's navy seizing territory in the South China Sea, or Islamist terrorists—they all imagine that the way to inherit the earth is through violent force and extreme belligerence. Sometimes it appears that such people are prevailing. But Jesus says that those who take this path will ultimately fail. It is the meek who will inherit the earth.

A prime historical example of that can be seen in the early history of the church. For three hundred years after the earthly ministry of Jesus, the church suffered persecution, sometime severe, at the hands of the Roman Empire, one of most powerful and belligerent empires in history; but it is the church, following Jesus' way of meekness, that inherited the

earth.

Or for a contemporary example, last Sunday I mentioned the current persecution of Christians in China. The persecution began, of course, back in 1949, when Chairman Mao took brutal steps to try to eliminate religion altogether from China. There were just one million Christians at the time in all of China. They persevered in meekness. They grew; and that growth has really picked up the pace in recent decades. Today there are well over 50 million Christians in China. The Chinese Communist Party recently launched a crackdown. I mentioned last Sunday how the government has been tearing down the crosses from church buildings, or in some cases the government has just torn down the whole building. The most outrageous case of that occurred a few months ago at the Beitou Church in the city of Zhumadian, when a government-backed demolition team, in cahoots with a corrupt local businessman, came to raze the church. The pastor and the pastor's wife stood in front of a bulldozer in protest. The bulldozer buried them alive in a ditch. The pastor's wife died; the pastor managed to survive. The case raised such an uproar that a Chinese court finally awarded the land back to the church, though the building had been leveled, and of course the pastor's wife was a martyr.

What will come of this struggle? China experts predict that by the year 2030 . . . there will be more Christians in China than in any other nation on earth. The wicked may rage; but the meek—those who follow Christ in humble, self-giving commitment to God—will inherit the earth.

Of course, if you are the one being bulldozed, it may be hard to see the blessing in this; and this brings us back to the core Biblical teaching about blessing. We have already noted three foundational teachings that are rooted in the story of Abraham- Blessing begins with God. The heart of blessing is fellowship with God. And to be blessed means especially to become a blessing for others, to be an instrument of God's purpose. To this list we can add several other key points that we have observed through this sermon series and that came out also in our Scripture readings this morning.

One central point is that God's blessing involves not so much the bestowal of good things as it does the bestowal of God's Spirit. Chinese Christians are often not seeing a lot of good things right now, but they are receiving God's Spirit in significant measure. This also explains how the Bible can call upon us to bless God, as it did in that passage we heard from Psalm 103. We cannot bestow good things upon God, but we can lift our spirit to God, which is what the Bible is talking about when it says, "Bless the Lord." (Psalm 103:1,2)

Another key, related truth is that God's blessing brings spiritual more than material benefits. Although material benefits are among God's good gifts, the Bible emphasizes that the greatest gifts are spiritual. So Psalm 103 speaks of God "forgiving our iniquity," "redeeming our life from the Pit," that is from final death, and "crowning us with steadfast love and mercy" [*The Lord forgives your iniquity, redeems your life from the Pit, and crowns you with steadfast love and mercy. Psalm 103:3-4*] Likewise the passage that we heard from Ephesians spoke of how "God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ"

(Ephesians 1:3), and the passage went on to elaborate what many of those gifts are: redemption, forgiveness, the riches of God's grace, and the inheritance of eternal life [*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace . . . Ephesians 1:7*]

This brings us to another important truth—God's blessing is both now and for eternity. So, for example, when Jesus says that “the meek will inherit the earth,” this has both a present and an eternal sense. It is significant that when Jesus spoke these words, he was actually quoting the Old Testament—Psalm 37, which says, “The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow . . . yet in a little while the wicked will be no more. The meek will inherit the earth.” (Psalm 37: 10,11,14) This has the present day meaning that we have already noted—that although the wicked act with violent force, it is the meek who will finally prevail on this earth. But Jesus also gave this verse a future meaning. The word translated “earth” can mean the planet earth, but it can also be translated “land”—the meek shall inherit “the land”—and for the followers of Jesus there comes to mind the Promised Land of heaven. Our inheritance—as discussed in that passage we heard from Ephesians—is not just for this world but for all eternity.

All this explains how the blessing of God brings real joy, even as we live in a world full of challenge. When we open ourselves in faith to how God would bless us in Jesus Christ, we receive the touch of God's Spirit, the riches of God's grace, the empowerment to share in God's purposes, the assurance of God's victory, and the promise of heaven. This gives reason for great joy, even as we face serious trials. So the prophet Isaiah declared, “The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord,” [Isaiah 29:19].

We live in an age in which many people think that if you want anything good in this world, you've got to seize what you want for yourself, and perhaps hope that you get some good luck along the way. The Biblical teaching on blessing turns that whole notion on its head. The Bible says that God has a plan for your blessing. This is what Paul was talking about in Ephesians when he said that “God has made known to us the mystery of His will . . . a plan for the fullness of time . . . We have been destined according to the purpose of Him who accomplishes everything according to His counsel and will, so that we, setting our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of His glory.” (Ephesians 1:9-12) What this says is that a good future does not belong to those who are forcefully grasping after what they think they want, or who push others out of the way, or who are just lucky in this world. A good future unfolds from the hand of God, who acts for our eternal blessing through Jesus Christ. We share in that blessing today when we open ourselves in faith to Christ and how God's Spirit would be at work through our lives. So the meek—those who live in humble commitment to Christ—do inherit the earth, as they both receive God's blessing and, by the empowerment of Christ, become a blessing for others.