

Meek Rhymes with...?
Sermon text: Matthew 5:1-5
Bruce Hedgepeth
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I. Setting for the sermon

While I was in seminary, my wife, Cindy, and I got to go on a trip to Israel hosted by one of my Old Testament professors. It was a great trip, seeing so many of the places that we read about in the Bible. For me, actually being there and experiencing it first-hand helped bring the scriptures to life in a new way. A number of you went to the Holy Land with Pastor Steve just about a year ago. Perhaps others here today have also been to Israel. You know what I mean.

Even though there were so many amazing things to see, a few of them stand out for me. One of those highlights was visiting the hillside where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount – the very place where he spoke the Beatitudes we’ve been looking at the past couple of weeks. It is located in the north of Israel, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus gave the greatest sermon ever preached on a green, grassy hillside overlooking the sea.

Our group arrived there early in the morning before the other tourists. We gathered in an outdoor chapel that is shaded by a grape arbor. Each day the Old Testament professor asked some member of the group to lead a devotional, and that day he asked Cindy and me to do it. So the whole group sat there under the grape arbor, looking out over the Sea of Galilee, which was still shrouded in the early morning mist, and we could hear the sound of a nearby flock of sheep. Cindy and I took turns reading the words of the Sermon on the Mount.

As we read Jesus’ words, a small fishing boat came into view in the mist. It moved slowly across our group’s view as they heard: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” It was the kind of moment that raises “goose bumps” on your arms – seeing a fisherman like Peter or Andrew or James or John, while you listen to the Master’s words on the very spot where he spoke them.

There are so many memorable, powerful words that Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount – not just the Beatitudes at the beginning of Matthew 5. Later in the same chapter, the Lord told his listeners, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of world... I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” In chapter 6, Jesus taught his followers how to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by your name...” – like we prayed earlier this morning. At the end of chapter six, the Master speaks the words that I claimed as my life verses during my seminary years, “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ... Indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” In Matthew, chapter 7, Jesus speaks the Golden Rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”

The Sermon on the Mount: memorable words, powerful words, words to live by – right? Overall, certainly, but I have to admit that I didn’t always understand or even like that third Beatitude in Matthew 5, verse 5, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” I didn’t get what Jesus meant by that. What would it look like to be “meek”? It sounds so negative, doesn’t it – like an invitation to be a doormat and let others walk all over you. How is that connected with “inheriting the earth”? The concepts don’t seem to go together – do they?

II. Practicing what you preach

Sometimes when a teaching is difficult to understand, it can be helpful to have an example. Thankfully, Jesus practiced what he preached, so his own life provides a working definition of what the “meekness” he talked about in the Beatitudes looks like with skin on.

Before we consider a few examples of meekness from the Master’s life, let’s be clear about what we think the word means. When you saw the sermon title for the message this morning was “Meek Rhymes with...” what was the first word that came into your mind? Was it cheek or tweak or sleek? Probably not: the first word that most of us thought of was... weak, right? That’s probably the main association we have with the word “meek.”

But, as you may have guessed by now, “weak” or “doormat” or “spineless” are not synonyms for the biblical concept of meekness. A better definition of the word is actually “strength under control.” That’s why the picture on the front cover of the bulletin is of an elephant lifting its foot for a human trainer. The elephant obeys the trainer not because it is weak. We all know that the huge animal could crush the man with its foot. It could pick him up with its trunk and hurl him through the air. The elephant lifting its foot for the trainer to examine is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is an image of strength under control. That’s the kind of thing Jesus was talking about when he said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

That’s also how Jesus lived his life. In the fourth chapter of Matthew’s gospel – just prior to the Beatitudes at the beginning of chapter five, we find the account of Jesus’ encounter with the devil in the desert wilderness. Satan tempted the Master not because he was weak; rather, he tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread because he knew the Lord had the power to do it. He tempted the Lord to jump off the pinnacle of the temple not because Jesus was spineless; rather, he knew that angels were really available at the Master’s beck and call. All Jesus had to do was say the word. The devil tempted Jesus to rule all the kingdoms of the world not because he was a doormat; rather, he wanted to find out if the strength of the Son was truly submitted to the will of the Father. That’s what biblical meekness looks like.

Or how about much later in Matthew’s gospel, chapter 26, when the Jewish religious leaders had Jesus arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane? Was the Master too weak to prevent himself from being taken into their custody? Far from it. Jesus calmed his disciples’ impulse to resist the arrest violently with these words recorded in Matthew 26:53, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” Three of the disciples, Peter, James, and John had been with Jesus on the mountain when the Master allowed the fullness of his divine glory to shine out from within him. Jesus had the power to do whatever he wanted to do at his arrest. But he chose meekness. His strength was submitted to God’s control.

And remember Matthew’s account of the crucifixion itself. The gospel writer records how the chief priests and scribes and Jewish elders mocked Jesus in Matthew 27:42, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now and we will believe him.” But we know from the account of the Master raising the dead girl back to life in Matthew 9 that he really did have the power to come down from the cross. Instead, he chose meekness. He placed his power under God’s control.

III. Walking the talk

Now there are some pretty obvious differences between Jesus and the rest of us here. I mean, if you hiked with me to the top of a mountain and I tried to get all the light within me to shine out – well, let’s just say you probably wouldn’t need sunglasses. Even though none of us is

the same as Jesus, he still spoke those words to his followers from our text this morning, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” He still set for us an amazing example of what biblical meekness looks like with skin on. And he calls us to follow his example, even though we will do it imperfectly.

Here’s what I’m talking about. I saw the most incredible vehicle yesterday. It was a huge Hummer that was jacked up about four feet off the ground and outfitted with monster tires that looked like they would generate enough traction to drive over a small house. What would it be like if we all drove that kind of vehicle? Do you think very many people would be anxious to cut us off on the Tamiami Trail? Do you think people would park too close to us in the Publix lot? I mean, we could drive right over most other cars without feeling much of bump! But what if, even though we drove a very large, very powerful Hummer, we decided to be the most courteous and considerate driver in Sarasota County? What if we waived to allow other cars to go before us? That would be an example of what meekness looks like from an automotive perspective.

So how about personally and relationally – what does it look like for us to be meek the way Jesus talks about in the Beatitudes? A meek person would not be servile, but we would be secure enough in ourselves and our relationship with God not to insist on having our own way. A meek person would be strong enough to yield to others, even when we have the ability to impose our will. Most importantly, meekness means that we would be obedient to the Lord.

As I’ve thought about this Beatitude, I’ve found myself appreciating our Lifetree Café ministry more and more. It’s a conversation café that we offer in the Campus Center every Sunday morning at 10:15 and we’re planning to offer a Lifetree Café in a community location on Tuesday evenings beginning sometime this fall. I think Lifetree has it right when it comes to the kind of biblical meekness Jesus was talking about in Matthew 5. Listen to the motto of Lifetree – it’s repeated every week at the beginning of each episode, regardless of the topic: “You are welcome here. Your thoughts are welcome here. Your doubts are welcome here. We’re all in this together. God is here – ready to connect with you in a fresh way.”

That, I believe, is a wonderful example of biblical meekness. Although we may be deeply rooted in our faith, although there may be much about the truth of scripture we hold dear, although we may be absolutely convinced that our way is THE way, we can still be humble enough – meek enough in Jesus’ terms – to be sensitive and compassionate to where that other person is coming from. Not that our beliefs and faith commitment are any less sincere, but that in the strength of our convictions we display the meekness to allow a place of welcome for others to encounter the Lord.

So what’s the answer? Meek rhymes with what – according to Jesus? Far from rhyming with weak, it rhymes with spiritual humility. It rhymes with strength of belief submitted to God’s control. It rhymes with leaving room for others to explore a relationship with the Lord. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Amen.