

“Character that Counts: Humility”

Deuteronomy 8:6-18 ¹

Μακαριοι οι πραεις, οτι αυτοι κληρονομησουσιν την γην.
“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5).

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Commander Joe Rochefort, a Naval Intelligence Officer stationed on Oahu, succeeded in breaking the Japanese communication codes. The intelligence he was able to gather enabled him to predict that the Japanese would attack Midway Island on June 3, 1942, which they did. Because of Rochefort’s information, the United States surprised the Japanese Navy with its first defeat in 350 years. And, due in large measure to this crippling defeat at Midway, Japan eventually lost the war.

Unfortunately, Rochefort never received any recognition for this achievement. Several officials in Washington, D.C. falsified records and claimed the credit, even though they had thought that the attack would come a week later. Rochefort’s “reward” was being reassigned to a floating dry dock in San Francisco. In their book, *Deceit at Pearl Harbor*, Lieutenant Commander Ken Landis and Staff Sergeant Rex Gunn chronicled what really happened and told about a sign Rochefort kept on his desk at the dry dock: “We can accomplish anything providing no one cares who gets the credit.” “That,” they wrote, “was the attitude that won the battle of Midway.”²

John Ortberg told the story of the CEO of a Fortune 500 company who pulled into a service station not too long ago to get gas. He went inside to pay, and when he came out he noticed his wife engaged in a deep discussion with the service station attendant. It turned out that she knew him. In fact, when they were in high school, she had dated him.

The CEO got in the car, and the two drove on in silence. He was feeling pretty good about himself when he finally said, “I’ll bet I know what you’re thinking. I’ll bet you’re thinking you’re glad you married me, a Fortune 500 CEO, and not him, a service station attendant.”

“No,” she said, “I was thinking if I’d married him, he’d be a Fortune 500 CEO and you’d be a service station attendant.”³

One of these stories is a story of pride; the other is a story of humility. *Which of these stories would you rather have told about you?*

This morning we come to Jesus’ third Beatitude, found in Matthew 5:5: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” I suspect that, of the eight Beatitudes, this third one may be the least understood. After all, who among us wants to be “meek”? If your high school “lit” classes were like mine, the idea of “meek” conjures up the forlorn figure of James Thurber’s henpecked character, Walter Mitty.⁴

We tend to think of “meek” as weak or spineless, but this was not the case when Jesus used the word. In Jesus’ day, the adjective *πραεις* referred to a powerful animal—such as a war horse—that had learned to accept control. Aristotle used the word to describe persons who were strong, with neither too little nor too much anger.

The dictionary has two definitions for “meek.” The first, “deficient in spirit and courage,” describes Walter Mitty. The other, “enduring injury with patience and without resentment,”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on July 20, 2014.

² Ken Landis and Rex Gunn, *Deceit at Pearl Harbor: From Pearl Harbor to Midway* (1st Books Library, 2002).

³ John Ortberg, *Love Beyond Reason* (Zondervan, 1998), pp. 142-143.

⁴ James Thurber, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (*New Yorker* magazine, 1939).

describes Jesus. Why did Jesus “endure injury with patience and without resentment”? Jesus did this because He knew that absorbing evil into His own being was the only way to defeat it. Dr. King did the same thing for the same reason, and he learned that strategy from Jesus.

It’s easy to read the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion and to think of Jesus as being meek in the Walter Mitty sense of the word. At the surface level, Jesus seems to be helplessly caught up in a sequence of events completely beyond His control. But as is frequently true in reading the Bible, that first impression could hardly be more mistaken.

The truth of the matter is that Jesus was the only person who was in control during those awful hours. He was the only person who was self-determined, with His eyes fixed on the finish line. As Jesus had already told His disciples, “*No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again*” (John 10:18). “*Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels*” (Matthew 26:53)? **What Jesus did, He did on purpose.**

It seems to me that “humility” may offer us more help than “meekness” does in understanding this Beatitude. Humility involves recognizing our true place in the created order, realizing that all that is good in our lives is really the result of God’s grace and the kindness of others toward us.

“Humility” has to do with the absence of pride or arrogance, with a spirit of deference or submission, especially toward God.⁵ To tell the truth, you and I don’t like deference or submission much more than we like meekness, but let’s look at them, anyway.

In the first place, deference and submission can be offered either from a position of weakness or from a position of strength. Which of these was Jesus? Well, to mention but two examples, when the Nazareth mob tried to push Him over a cliff, Jesus just walked out through the middle of the crowd (Luke 4:29-30). When Jesus drove the merchants and their customers out of the Temple, knocking over the tables of the money changers and the stalls of those selling doves, the Temple guards were powerless to stop Him (Matthew 21:12).

Amazingly, Jesus told us that “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*” (John 14:9), and that “*The Father and I are one*” (John 10:30). And Paul wrote that Jesus “*is supreme over all creation*” (Colossians 1:15). In view of these realities, **I submit to you that there was nothing weak about Jesus.**

At the same time, while He lived among us, Jesus demonstrated complete submission to the Father: “*I do nothing on my own,*” He said, “*but speak just what the Father has taught me*” (John 8:28); “*I don’t speak on my own authority. The Father who sent me gave me his own instructions as to what I should say*” (John 12:49, NLT); “*The Son does only what he sees the Father doing*” (John 5:19, NLT); “*I do nothing without consulting the Father*” (John 5:30, NLT).

Some of us are currently reading Charles Sheldon’s classic novel, *In His Steps*, from which we get the question, “**What would Jesus do?**” It seems to me that these statements from Jesus tell us that if we’re to live as Jesus lived, the real question is “**What would the Father do?**” “**What would Abba do?**”

⁵ Those who knew him well often described my father as an exceedingly humble man, even though he was the Director of the Cotton Classing Division of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. See also Numbers 12:3, “*Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.*”

For us, even more so than for Jesus, true humility does nothing without consulting the Father, that we may do the Father's will, playing our own unique part in the cosmic drama of the universe. And while those unique parts are sometimes quite costly, it's encouraging to be reminded that God rewards obedience.

On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus said to His Father, "*I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began*" (John 17:4-5). And what happened after that? "*God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Philippians 2:9-11).

And what happened after that? Thousands and millions of angels gathered around God's throne and sang in a mighty chorus, "*You are worthy . . . because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.*"

*Then I looked, [John wrote,] and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying, "**Worthy is the Lamb**, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"* (Revelation 5:9-12). **God honors obedience.**

So what reward does Jesus promise to us if we center our lives on serving God with humility rather than being seduced by pride? In this third Beatitude, Jesus told us that if we are meek, we will "inherit the earth," that "the whole earth will belong to [us]." What's all that about?

I really don't think Jesus was promising that those who follow Him are going to become wealthy by the standards of this world. While worldly wealth does come to some who follow Jesus, it doesn't come to all, and our fallen nature is such that worldly wealth is at least as likely to make us spiritual cripples as it is to make us spiritual giants. No, I think Jesus was talking about something else.

In the Revelation, John saw "*a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. . . . And [he] saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a beautiful bride prepared for her husband. . . . And the one sitting on the throne said, 'Look, I am making all things new! . . . All who are victorious will inherit these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children'*" (Revelation 21:1-2, 5, 7). Along this same line, Jesus told us that "*To all who are victorious, who obey me to the very end, I will give authority over all the nations. . . . They will have the same authority I received from my Father*" (Revelation 2:26-28).

I think the inheritance promised by the third Beatitude is this New Earth, where God "*will remove all of [our] sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. . . . the old world and its evils [will be] gone forever*" (Revelation 21:4). **That's what Jesus promises to those who are spiritually humble. We will reign with Him in a New Creation completely and forever unstained by sin!**

Of course, you know as well as I do that it's a lot easier to be proud than it is to be humble, but the ends of those paths are very different. The Bible tells us that, long before Creation as we know it, the angel we know as Satan was "*the perfection of wisdom and beauty . . . [with] access to the holy mountain of God*" (Ezekiel 28:12, 14). But for all his fine beginning, God later said to Satan,

“Your heart was filled with pride because of all your beauty. You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth” (Ezekiel 28:17). Jesus said, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven,”⁶ and I’ve told you before that I think this planet is actually heaven’s Alcatraz . . . but that’s a story for another day.

Long after Satan’s imprisonment here, but still more than 3,000 years ago, Moses warned the people of Israel about pride: “When you have become full and prosperous and have built fine homes to live in and when your flocks and herds have become very large and your silver and gold have multiplied along with everything else, that is the time to be careful. Do not become proud at that time and forget the Lord your God . . . Always remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you power to become rich, and he does it to fulfill the covenant he made with your ancestors” (Deuteronomy 8:12-14, 18, NLT).⁷

We Americans do well to remember that warning alongside the promise of the third Beatitude: “God blesses those who are meek—those who are *πραεις*—for they will inherit the earth.”

I began with two stories. Let me end with two more. The Jewish poet and storyteller Noah ben Shea told this parable:

After dinner one night, some children came to their father and asked him to tell them a story. “A story about what?” he asked.

“About a giant!” Their father smiled and leaned against the warm stones at the side of the fireplace.

“Once there was a boy who asked his father to take him to see the great parade that passed through the village. The father, remembering the parade from when he was a boy, quickly agreed, and the next morning the boy and his father set out together.

“As they approached the parade route, people started to push in from all sides, and the crowd grew thick. When the people along the way became almost a wall, the father lifted his son and placed him on his shoulders.

“Soon the parade began, and as it passed, the boy kept telling his father how wonderful it was and how spectacular the colors and images were. Eventually the boy became so proud of what he saw that he made fun of those who saw less, saying, even to his father, ‘If only you could see what I see.’

“But,” he said, “what the boy did not think about was *why it was that he could see.*” Jacob stopped speaking, and it looked as though the story was over.

“Is that it?” his daughter asked with disappointment. “I thought you were going to tell us a story about a giant.”

“I did,” her father replied. “I told you a story about a boy who could have been a giant.”

“How!?!” the children all asked in unison.

⁶ Luke 10:18. See also Revelation 12:7-9.

⁷ See also the sermon, “The Drum Major Instinct,” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered on February 4, 1968 at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_drum_major_instinct/

“A giant,” their father explained, “is someone who remembers that we are all sitting on someone else’s shoulders.”

“And what does it make us if we don’t remember?” his son asked.

“A burden.”⁸

Finally, Jeff Collins told this story:

“It had been a trying week at our Love & Action office. At five o’clock on a Friday, I was looking forward to having a quiet dinner with friends. Then the phone rang.

“‘Jeff! It’s Jimmy!’ I heard a quivering voice say. Jimmy, who suffered from several AIDS-related illnesses, was one of our regular clients. ‘I’m really sick, Jeff. I’ve got a fever. Please help me.’

“I was angry. After a 60-hour workweek, I didn’t want to hear about Jimmy. I promised to be right over, but during the drive, I complained loudly to God about this inconvenience.

“The moment I walked in the door, I could smell the vomit. Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and in distress. I wiped his forehead, then got a bucket of soapy water to clean up the mess. I managed to maintain a façade of concern, even though I was raging inside.

“Jimmy’s friend, Russ, who also had AIDS, came down the stairs. The odor made Russ sick, too.

“As I cleaned the carpet around Russ’s chair, I was ready to explode inside. Then Russ startled me. ‘I understand! I understand!’

“‘What, Russ?’ Jimmy asked weakly.

“‘I finally understand who Jesus is,’ Russ said through tears. ‘He’s like Jeff!’ Weeping, I hugged Russ and prayed with him. That night Russ trusted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior—a God who had used me to show His love . . . in spite of myself.”⁹

And so I ask again, *which story would you rather have told about you?* When people look at your life, my friend, do they see someone whose pride makes you a burden, or do they see someone whose humility enables them to see Jesus?

I think I’d rephrase Commander Rochefort’s statement in my opening story just a bit. While there’s a great deal of truth in the statement that “We can accomplish anything providing no one cares who gets the credit,” I think the message of the third Beatitude is more like this: *“There is no limit to what God can do through your life, so long as you do not touch the glory.”* So how’s it going to be for you?

Hymn: “Let Others See Jesus in You”

⁸ Steve Moore, “A Graceful Goodbye,” *Leadership* (Summer, 2002), 41-42.

⁹ Jeffrey Collins, “It Happened on a Friday,” *Christian Reader*, vol. 36, no. 2 (March/April 1998).