

The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

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As recorded in Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount contains counsel and commandment, teachings which the chapter heading says “replace and transcend some aspects of the Law of Moses.” Included in that sermon are the Beatitudes, which describe various blessings that come to people with different spiritual attitudes or conditions.

Together, the Beatitudes describe attributes of spiritual perfection. As I read them, some of the statements make perfect sense and seem very natural, such as those that mourn will be comforted and the merciful will obtain mercy. Some connections, however, are harder to discern. Into that category falls the declaration, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

As you can imagine, I've spent quite a bit of time thinking, studying, and praying about meekness since receiving the assignment to speak about it. I've come to appreciate the role of this rather unsung virtue in helping us live a Christlike life.

Though the immediate relationship of meekness and inheriting the earth may be a bit hard to see, study of the matter reveals a most glorious connection. It begins with an understanding of the nature of Heavenly Father and His desire to bless us. Joseph Smith said, “As God has designed our happiness—and the happiness of all His creatures, he never has—He never will institute an ordinance or give a commandment to His people that is not calculated in its nature to promote that happiness which He has designed, and which will not end in the greatest amount of

good and glory to those who become recipients of his law and ordinances.”¹

That means that the commandments and conditions set forth by Heavenly Father are designed specifically to allow Him to bless us. He doesn't make laws to curtail our fun or burden our lives; He makes them because He is blessing oriented. Heavenly Father wants to bless His children; however, He is bound by eternal law and can bless only those who obey the laws that lead to the blessings. That is explained in Doctrine and Covenants 130:20–21, which says, “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated.”

Of all the blessings our Father wants to give us, Doctrine and Covenants 14:7 gives us this assurance of His greatest gift: “And, if you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God.”

So, what does all of this have to do with being meek? Heavenly Father wants to bless us, His commandments are calculated to guide us back to His presence, and being in His presence is His greatest gift and will bring us great happiness and joy. Among all the commandments and scriptural guidelines that qualify us to return to the presence of our Father, we receive this gentle reminder in Moroni, “for none is acceptable before God, save the meek and lowly in heart” (Moroni 7:44). But meekness seems like such a nondescript virtue. How can it possibly determine our acceptability before God?

The human body is composed of trillions of cells, and in each cell are thousands of enzymes. Though small, each enzyme acts as a catalyst, or trigger, for a biochemical reaction. Enzymes are involved in digestion, in production of energy, and in many other vital physiological functions. Failure of an enzyme to function properly can result in disease or even death. Meekness, it seems to me, acts as a spiritual enzyme. All of the so-called greater virtues depend on meekness for their accomplishment. The meek will inherit the earth because only the meek will develop all of the other attributes required for entrance into the celestial kingdom.

Dictionary definitions of meekness include “deficient in spirit or courage: submissive.”² This definition of meekness seems to lend a negative connotation to the word and probably has influenced the world's view of this vital attribute. The common perception of a meek person is of someone afraid of her own shadow, cowering before the will of others, unable to defend herself or her position. I dare say that if you take a poll of friends and neighbors and ask what qualities

they most want to develop, meekness will not be on many lists. We simply fail to grasp the importance of meekness because we so often misunderstand what it is.

Contrast that definition and perception with President Harold B. Lee's observation: "A meek man is defined as one who is not easily provoked or irritated and forbearing under injury or annoyance. Meekness is not synonymous with weakness. The meek man is the strong, the mighty, the man of complete self-mastery. He is the one who has the courage of his moral convictions, despite . . . pressure. . . . In controversy his judgment is the court of last resort, and his sobered counsel quells the rashness of the mob. He is humble-minded; he does not bluster. . . . He is a natural leader and is the chosen of army and navy, business and church to lead where other men follow. He is the 'salt' of the earth and shall inherit it."³

This statement shows meekness to be the antithesis of the general view of one lacking in confidence and courage. In fact, meekness before the Lord is the result of supreme confidence in Him. In Doctrine and Covenants 121, we learn that confidence is a result of righteousness. After the declaration that "no power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned," we are told, "and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God" (D&C 121:41, 45).

That confidence is a two-fold blessing. First, it refers to our trust or faith in the Lord being strengthened. Second, it reflects our increased faith or trust in ourselves to act appropriately and according to God's will. Confidence, both in the Lord and in ourselves, is a critical component of meekness. In Hebrews, Paul warns the Saints, "Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise" (Hebrews 10:35–36).

Elder Neal Maxwell said: "Meekness is neither alarmist nor shoulder-shrugging unconcern. It involves shoulder-squaring self-discipline, and what follows is the special composure that meekness brings."⁴

Special composure—that's another way of describing confidence.

It is clear that the Lord considers meekness an essential attribute of sainthood. Meekness seldom shows up alone in scriptural context. Rather, it is generally found in a cluster of Christlike characteristics. For instance, Mosiah teaches: "For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the

enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19).

Meekness becomes the basis for many blessings. Here are some examples from the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants:

Psalms 25:9 —“The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way.”

Psalms 37:11—“But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.”

Isaiah 29:19—“The meek also shall increase their joy in the Lord.”

Zephaniah 2:3—“Seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the Lord’s anger.”

Moroni 8:26—“And because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect love.”

Doctrine and Covenants 19:23—“Walk in the meekness of my Spirit, and you shall have peace in me.”

Why will the meek be guided in judgment and learn the ways of the Lord? Why will they enjoy an abundance of peace and have joy in the Lord? Why will they be spared the Lord’s anger and be visited by the Holy Ghost and thus filled with hope and perfect love? I think it is because the meek will *let* those things happen. The proud will fail to seek the Lord and fail to *let* Him into their lives. The verse in Mosiah suggests that it is not natural to be submissive to the Lord, nor to be humble, patient, and meek. These come by putting off the natural man and becoming, or developing, the desired qualities.

The natural characteristic that most gets in the way of meekness is pride. When we allow ourselves to become puffed up with pride, we can be so easily deflated. Like a bird that fluffs up its feathers to look larger when in danger, our pride is just so much window dressing. It is related not to true confidence but to fear—fear that we will be shown up or found out. Pride is easily offended, but meekness is gentle, understanding, and forgiving. Pride looks out for itself; meekness, for its neighbor. Pride experiences success with attitude; meekness succeeds with gratitude. Pride views disappointment or failure with anger and blame; meekness gets through

them with patience and supplications for strength.

It would be awfully nice to have some sort of a device to give us early warning signs of flagging meekness and impending pride. We might call our device a meek-o-meter, and wear it near our hearts. The meek-o-meter would beep (or better yet, drive us to our knees) when our responses to life's situations showed decreased meekness. The meek-o-meter would help us find ways to deflate our own pride before it consumes us.

Let's look at some situations where the meek-o-meter might come in handy, and some examples of folks who passed the test:

First, *being misjudged*. If anything can make us resentful and defensive, it's being misjudged, but consider Pahoran in the Book of Mormon. In the midst of battle, Moroni, who is unaware of an insurrection at home, sends a scathing letter to Pahoran, the governor. If it had gone by e-mail, it might have been called a flame. Instead of sputtering and holding a grudge, Pahoran responded to Moroni's letter this way, "And now, in your epistle you have censured me, but it mattereth not; I am not angry, but do rejoice in the greatness of your heart" (Alma 61:9).

Next, consider *receiving priesthood direction not of your choosing*. I served a mission in Taiwan. At that time, our mission was involved in developing a number of media presentations to expose people in that largely Buddhist area to Christianity as well as to the Church and principles of the gospel. In our mission was an elder very skilled in anything electronic, and he was heavily involved in working with sound and lighting systems for the presentations. There was another elder in the mission who absolutely loved teaching the gospel—nothing made him happier than knocking on doors and spreading the good word. For the last several weeks of this elder's mission, he was assigned to be the companion of the electronic wizard. That meant not tracting and teaching but assisting with media productions. One day I was talking to the mission president, and this elder's name and current assignment came up. The president said, "You know why Elder X is a great man? It's because he's not doing what *he* wants to do; he's doing what *I* want him to do."

Another situation for the meek-o-meter is *receiving a Church calling that does not require all of your considerable skills*. A friend of mine experienced a shift in ward boundaries and attended her new ward for the first time. There, happily fulfilling her calling as the Relief Society pianist, was a former Relief Society General President. My mission president was released from presiding over a mission and called to be a scoutmaster. I know of a former bishop

whose first call after his release was to serve as the nursery leader for Home, Family, and Personal Enrichment night. And, of course, there is J. Reuben Clark, Jr., who had served as First Counselor to President George Albert Smith and was called to be Second Counselor in the First Presidency under David O. McKay. Rather than take offense at what some might consider a demotion, he taught, “In the service of the Lord, it is not where you serve but how.”⁵

What about *perceived broken word*? One of my dear colleagues is serving as a mission president. After he had accepted the calling but before he was told where he would serve, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve assured him he would be in an English-speaking mission, where, because of some health concerns, there would be good health care. A few weeks later a letter came informing him he would serve in Romania. After the initial shock, but without anger or resentment, this humble man simply hired a Romanian tutor and began his preparations to serve. After several weeks, he received a telephone call asking him if he would consider presiding over a mission in the United States.

What happens when you hold a responsible, visible position of authority in your profession or in the Church? Moses was a mighty man, but Numbers 12:3 informs us, “Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.” It’s hard for anyone who has seen Cecil B. DeMille’s production of the Ten Commandments to picture Moses as meek, at least not by the world’s definition. Moses was indeed a mighty prophet, liberator of the children of Israel, and the great lawgiver. Yet, Moses 1:6–10 describes the Lord’s interaction with Moses and his vision of the world. When Moses’s strength returned to him, he said, “Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed” (Moses 1:10). Moses didn’t mean that man had no worth; rather, he meant that man’s ability is insignificant compared to that of God. Moses was meek because he submitted his will to the will of the Father.

Though he didn’t receive the same expansive vision that Moses had, we can also take a cue from Theodore Roosevelt. “Before retiring to bed, Roosevelt and his friend the naturalist William Beebe would go out and look at the skies, searching for a tiny patch of light near the constellation of Pegasus. ‘That is the Spiral Galaxy in Andromeda,’ they would chant. ‘It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It consists of one billion suns, each larger than our sun.’ Then Roosevelt would turn to his companion and say, ‘Now I think we are small enough. Let’s go to bed.’”⁶ There’s nothing like appreciating the immensity of space

or the precision of a flower petal, the fury of a storm or the calm of a summer breeze to keep our own abilities in perspective.

What does your meek-o-meter register when you *feel unappreciated or you don't see results from your labors*? That's the picture in Helaman 10. Previously, Nephi, the son of Helaman, had given up the judgment seat so he could devote all of his time to preaching the gospel. He was distressed by the wickedness of his people, and while pondering the situation, he heard a voice say to him, "Blessed art thou, Nephi, for those things which thou hast done; for I have beheld how thou hast with unwearyingness declared the word, which I have given thee, unto this people. And thou hast not feared them, and hast not sought thine own life, but hast sought my will, and to keep my commandments. And now, because thou hast done this with such unwearyingness, behold, I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will" (Helaman 10:4–5). Like Moses, Nephi submitted his will to the Father's will.

What about *being treated rudely*? Elder Wayne S. Peterson of the Seventy related a story in the October 2001 General Conference. He was waiting in his car while his wife ran into a store. He glanced into the car in front of him and saw several children looking at him. A small boy of about six years caught his eye and immediately stuck his tongue out at him. "My first reaction was to stick my tongue out at him. I thought, *What have I done to deserve this?* Fortunately, before I reacted, I remembered a principle taught in general conference the week before by Elder Marvin J. Ashton. He taught how important it was to act instead of react to the events around us. So I waved at the little boy. He stuck his tongue out at me again. I smiled and waved again. This time he waved back." Elder Peterson and the boy, soon joined by his siblings, exchanged waves until their arms were tired. Finally the parents returned and drove off, with the children still waving and smiling. Elder Peterson then said, "I was grateful that I chose to act in a friendly way rather than react to my young friend's childish behavior. In doing so I avoided the negative feelings I would have felt had I followed my natural instinct."⁷

I like this small illustration precisely because it is small. Our conquering of the natural self depends on our reactions to so many little occurrences—we have opportunities every day to respond with meekness or with defensiveness and pride. When you know more about the gospel than your Sunday School teacher, or think you do, do you participate, pout, or pontificate? Only

one of those responses escapes the meek-o-meter's beep. How do we, as adults, respond to perhaps unsolicited but still insightful counsel from a parent? How do we respond to a work supervisor's evaluation of our performance that points out areas for improvement? How do we respond to counsel from our bishop, stake president, or general authorities in conference? How do we deal with the difference between our wants and our income? How do we react to people who simply do not share our opinion on an issue? Again, so many little things, but life is made up of little things.

Of course, no discussion of meekness is complete without the Savior. In many instances, the Savior described who and what He was. For instance, eight of the 138 sections of the Doctrine and Covenants begin with reference to Himself as Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I find it interesting, though, that He very seldom describes His own attributes. One of few instances is in Matthew 11:29, where He gives this invitation, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls." The Creator of the universe, the beginning and the end, describes Himself as meek and lowly.

And why would He describe Himself that way? Again, He was willing to submit Himself and His power to the will of the Father. Perhaps nowhere is this illustrated better than in the Garden of Gethsemane where He said, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39). Despite His tremendous power, the Savior wanted to do what His Father wanted Him to do.

Not only was Christ the perfect example of meekness but we can call upon the grace of the Lord to help increase our own level of meekness. Ether 12:26–27 says, "My grace is sufficient for the meek . . . ; my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me." The Bible dictionary points out that in addition to making our resurrection possible and allowing the repentant to obtain eternal life, grace gives us strength and assistance to do good works that we otherwise could not do if left to our own means.⁸ In other words, the very act of trying to humble ourselves and seeking the Lord's help in becoming meek will increase our ability to become meek.

Now, back to the Beatitude, "the meek shall inherit the earth." Where does inheriting the earth come in? In Doctrine and Covenants 88, the Lord reveals the most glorious destiny of the earth upon which we live: "And the redemption of the soul is through him that quickeneth all things, in whose bosom it is decreed that the poor and the meek of the earth shall inherit it.

Therefore, it must needs be sanctified from all unrighteousness, that it may be prepared for the celestial glory; For after it hath filled the measure of its creation, it shall be crowned with glory, even with the presence of God the Father; That the bodies who are of the celestial kingdom may possess it forever and ever; for, for this intent was it made and created . . .” (D&C 88:17–20).

Think of it. The meek will literally inherit the earth when it receives its paradisiacal glory and becomes a celestial dwelling. From Doctrine and Covenants 88:25–26 we learn that “the earth abideth the law of a celestial kingdom, for it filleth the measure of its creation, and transgresseth not the law—Wherefore, it shall be sanctified; . . . and the righteous shall inherit it.” Again, there is a reference to keeping laws to receive blessings. The earth has kept the law of the celestial kingdom, so it shall receive celestial glory. It follows, then, that if we obey celestial law, we will receive celestial glory and inherit this earth. Developing and maintaining meekness will allow us to keep all of the other commandments and develop all of the other celestial attributes. In meekness we accept correction and counsel, love and live the commandments, and create an atmosphere of peace and love wherever we are.

President Howard W. Hunter said: “And what of the meek? In a world too preoccupied with winning through intimidation and seeking to be number one, no large crowd of folk is standing in line to buy books that call for mere meekness. But the meek shall inherit the earth, a pretty impressive corporate takeover—and done *without* intimidation! Sooner or later, and we pray sooner *than* later, everyone will acknowledge that Christ’s way is not only the *right* way, but ultimately the *only* way to hope and joy. Every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that gentleness is better than brutality, that kindness is greater than coercion, that the soft voice turneth away wrath. In the end, and sooner than that whenever possible, we must be more like him.”⁹

May we choose to follow the Savior’s example and become meek and lowly. Let us recognize that meek submission to the will of our Father is the only way we will truly be happy in this life and the only way to qualify for eternal happiness and celestial glory. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1 Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 256.

2 Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 9th ed., s.v. "meek."

3: Harold B. Lee, [vol. 3] in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church* series (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 203.

4 Neal A. Maxwell, *Meek and Lowly* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 15.

5 J. Reuben Clark, Jr., in *Conference Report*, April 1951, 154.

6 *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes*, ed. Clifton Fadiman (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), 476.

7 Wayne S. Peterson, "Our Actions Determine Our Character," *Ensign*, November 2001, 83.

8 *LDS Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "grace," 697.

9 Howard W. Hunter, " 'Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee,'" *Ensign*, May 1993, 64–65; emphasis in original.