

Matthew 5 v 5 A new vision for mission

Introduction

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5) What kind of image do you have in mind when you read those words? I suspect it is not remotely close to a Chuck Norris or a James Bond film? We may even be convinced that it would have hindered Katniss Everdeen, the heroine of the **Hunger Games** films series in her quest to free the oppressed people she represented. Deep down many of us may be afraid that such a quality would be of limited use in large parts of Syria or Iraq –or many other countries for that matter. We may even be thinking of workplaces where relationships are less than ideal and questioning whether such an approach would help in relating to this senior (or junior) staff member or with a particular colleague with whom you have a difficult relationship. Yet when we come to the Bible there are plenty of references to meekness. Numbers 12:3 in the Old Testament records this assessment of Moses' character. *Now Moses was a very humble [or meek] man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.* Remember he was leader of his nation for approximately forty years. Yet we wonder how someone with this quality would fare at Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons! Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30 stated: *'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle [or meek] and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'* In Galatians 5:22-23 Paul lists the character qualities that should grow and flourish in the life of a follower of Jesus. They include *gentleness* (NIV meekness NKJV). In Ephesians 4:1-3 Paul gave these Turkish Christians a challenge: *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle '[meek]'; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* We must accept that this character quality is embedded in the Bible and commended in both the Old and New Testaments. Therefore, we cannot avoid taking a close look at what it means for our daily lives.

1. Meekness is not weakness

We need to emphasize very strongly that meekness is not weakness! To think that way is to misunderstand the concept altogether. It is power or strength under control. It is something that comes up in the wise sayings in the book of Proverbs. For example, in Proverbs 16:32: *Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city.* Or Proverbs 25:28: *Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.* It is easy to lose our temper; It is not difficult to respond negatively to a critical comment or a harsh judgement. Greek philosopher Aristotle (384- 322BC, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.5.3) wrote: Anyone can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not easy. A lady once told American evangelist Billy Sunday that there was nothing wrong with losing her temper. She said: 'I blow up and then it's over with'. 'So does a shotgun', said the Evangelist, 'but look at the damage that is left behind.' [Warren Wiersbe, *Heirs of the King*, p. 66]. The Hebrew word 'anaw' is the term with which Jesus was familiar. It was various translated as 'humble' 'meek' or 'lowly'. It is a word that is frequently found in the book of Psalms describing a person who is humbly accepting the guidance of God and graciously accepts the circumstances in which they find themselves without growing resentful and bitter about it.

Such a person is convinced that God does have their best interests at heart and that He is at work in the world for the good of His people. We must be careful not to imply a passive resignation to difficult circumstances that we make no effort to improve where we can, but how such a person handles life's challenges will be very different to another person who does not display this quality. In several Psalms it is stated: *You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted; You encourage them, and You listen to their cry* (Psalm 10:17). Proverbs 3:34 declares that God: *...mocks proud mockers but shows favour to the humble [meek] and oppressed*. Psalm 22:26 states: *The poor [meek] will eat and be satisfied; those who seek the Lord will praise Him*. Psalm 25:9 reminds us that: *He guides the humble [meek] in what is right and teaches them His way*. The actual reference Jesus probably had in mind when delivering this message was Psalm 37:11: *But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity*.

The Greek word translated *meek* (*praus*) and its Latin equivalent (*mitis*) was commonly used to describe an animal that had been tamed and domesticated. For example, a horse which has been broken in and is easily controlled by an experienced rider using the reins; it is a wonderful picture of power under control. It was commonly viewed as a much sought after virtue in a wise person; a person who acts with gentleness when they could have stormed in like 'a bull in a china shop'. This term could be used of a king who could have exercised harsh discipline or even vengeance on a difficult subject people, but who instead sought to win them over with kindness. It was used centuries before the time of Jesus by Greek writer Xenophon to describe the great Persian ruler Cyrus, best known in the Bible for allowing the exiles to return to Israel after their seventy year exile in Babylon. He wrote this of Cyrus: One spoke of his wisdom, another of his strength, another of his gentleness (meekness) and another of his beauty and of his commanding presence (W. Barclay, *A Plain Man Looks at the Beatitudes*, pp. 37-38). In Jesus' day this word was used of a soothing medicine proscribed by doctors to reduce a high temperature in a patient caused by a fever. It was used by sailors to describe a gentle breeze that was refreshing on a hot day. The other common usage was by farmers to break in a young horse so that it could be ridden (W. Wiersbe, *Heirs of the King*, pp.66-67). The connection between all these images is the use of power in a controlled way to heal a sick person by destroying the cause of the illness; to refresh by a gentle breeze on a hot day – though a wind could under other circumstances be feared as the bringer of devastation to a community in the form of a hurricane. A horse inadequately trained will seriously risk the wellbeing both of the rider and itself as its chosen courses of action will be unpredictable. The picture of meekness in the ancient world and in the Old Testament is most certainly not one of weakness but of power under control harnessed in the right way for a good purpose.

2. Illustrations of meekness from the Bible

(a) **Thinking of others as well as of ourselves** In the early chapters of Genesis we have the account of the call and obedience of Abraham to leave his homeland in southern Iraq, in a city called Ur, then to move on beyond Haran the market town in Syria, the last bastion of urban dwelling, as he moved south towards Canaan (modern Israel) the Promised Land to which God had called him. Sometimes we can forget that other members of his extended family also made part of the journey with him. One who spent the most time with him was his nephew Lot. Once in their new homeland with its limited supply of food for humans and animals, tensions arose between their herdsmen and shepherds as they struggled to find sufficient grazing for the animals. This was potentially a very serious matter that could not be put off. How would they

make a decision about who would go where to provide for their animals? In that hierarchical culture Abraham as the older man and senior in the family had the right to tell Lot what would happen next. It is unlikely that Lot would verbally have shown any dissent from whatever choice was offered to him by his uncle. It was not a case of two equals saying 'After you!' Yet in the context what happened next was extraordinary, that any witnesses could have failed both to notice and remember. Genesis 13:8-12 records the details: *So Abram said to Lot, 'Let's not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are close relatives. ⁹ Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left.'* ¹⁰ *Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan towards Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)* ¹¹ *So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out towards the east. The two men parted company:* ¹² *Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.* In a region of the world dominated by desert and limited grasslands, Lot noticed a relatively small area of fertile grassland near some large settlements in the vicinity of what today we call the Dead Sea. He claimed that for his animals. As the younger man and his family and servants and animals disappeared into the distance I have no doubted that Abraham's employees were talking amongst themselves about what had happened. How could their master allow this to happen? Genesis 13:14-17 goes on to record a revelation from God to Abraham that from where he was the land to the north, south, east and west would belong to his descendants. Abraham would not see it in his lifetime but it came true. In the New Testament Paul wrote: *Honour one another above yourselves* (Romans 12:10); Also in Philippians 2:3-4 he wrote: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.* The choices you and I make affect not only our present and future, but also that of our descendants. In our 'instant' culture we may need to stop and reflect on that for a while. How might my decisions now influence my children or even grand-children in years to come?

(b) **The retribution of kindness** Joseph and his brothers did not get on to well. In fact it was a less than ideal wider family scenario as Joseph was clearly the favourite son of the favourite wife. Therefore, in addition to sibling rivalries the parenting skills on display left much room for improvement. However, when Joseph was seventeen relations plumbed the depths when his brothers sold him into slavery. The best part of a decade was 'lost' through enslavement. Yet in Egypt Joseph seemed to get on well with his master and was given a good position in his household, until his master's wife lied that he had attacked her in a sexually motivated attack, an allegation which resulted in his imprisonment. The first weeks and months inside must have been an awful time for Joseph. Yet God brought about circumstances that would never have been possible had he not suffered this disadvantage. In an extraordinary turn of events this young foreigner became the Vizier (Prime Minister) of Egypt at a time of impending national crisis. In the famine that followed his needy brothers came, like thousands of other people, looking for food. When over an extraordinary dinner he revealed his identity to his now terrified brothers he had the power to exact the most serious retribution with the full might of the Egyptian armed forces at his disposal. In Genesis 45:4-8 it states: *Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come close to me.'* *When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. ⁸ 'So then, it was not you who sent me*

here, but God. Other human beings will do things that hurt us, harm our reputations or careers or in other ways cause difficulties in our lives. We may be tempted at times to want revenge or become inwardly bitter –sometimes it may appear with good reason - but our mission, our calling is not to get even, but to live in a way that is honouring to God, in the footsteps of Jesus. We will, by God’s grace, hopefully, resist the temptation to retaliate instead seeking to keep our focus on Jesus who knows exactly what has gone on. Romans 8:28 reminds us that: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.* In the light of these words we can retaliate with kindness in contexts where we might even feel justified in behaving very differently were we not aware of the bigger picture! Meekness is not weakness; it is having the power to make other choices but choosing not to do so.

(c) **The example of Jesus** In Gethsemane Jesus could have resisted arrest and called for heavenly support to do so. He chose to restrain his followers from engaging in violent protest (Luke 22:49-52) and sought to set us an example in our personal relationships with other people. It was prophesied of Jesus in Isaiah 53:7 how He would react at the most difficult time of His earthly life. It states: *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open his mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He did not open his mouth.* More than two decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection Peter wrote these words in I Peter 2:23: *When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.* We cannot do this in our own strength but with the enabling power of the Holy Spirit we can live in a way that however faintly reflects the example of Jesus. Paul testified with these words to the reality of such a calling in Philippians 4:13: *I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.*

3. **The personal test of meekness**

(a) **How seriously do I seek to commit my future into God’s hands?** Paul wrote in II Timothy 1:11-12: *And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. ¹² That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.* Paul wrote these words in prison as he awaited execution for his faith. Jan Hus, the great Protestant Reformer murdered on the order of the Pope of Rome at Constance in Switzerland in July 1415 wrote the following words to a friend shortly before his own execution: *God deigns kindly to look upon us and to endow us with wondrous gifts: a narrow prison, a hard bed, plain food, cruel boards, toothache, vomiting and fever* (quoted by John Blanchard, *Blessed*, p. 129) In the nineteenth century George Muller an extraordinary man of faith who ran a large children’s home in Bristol wrote these words: *There was a day when I died, utterly died; died to the world, its approval or censure –died to the approval or blame even of my brethren and friends – and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God* (quoted by John Blanchard, *Blessed*, p. 130). I know that although I aim to do this there are times when I have had my doubts and fears, and you will have very likely had your moments as well, but by God’s grace we endeavour to make progress despite the less than promising circumstances we live through at times.

(b) **How do I respond to personal criticism?** People will have opinions about you and me just as you and I have opinions about other people as well. They may be more or less informed by a genuine knowledge of the person and the circumstances upon which they are passing judgement. We remember the example of Jesus in Hebrews 12:3: *Consider Him who endured such opposition*

from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. Throughout His earthly ministry there was a barrage of criticism about the content of His messages; the company He kept; the claims He made, yet He did not respond in like manner. This was not weakness. It takes far greater strength of character not to respond in kind when unjustly criticized; every ounce of our being sometimes cries out in self-justification and the urge to defend ourselves time and again is incredibly powerful. Yet in remembering the words of Jesus and His example we seek to resist acting and speaking in this way. John Stott once remarked that Anglicans happily recite the General Confession of sin in church services and refer to themselves as ‘miserable sinners’. It causes me no great problem. I can take it in my stride. But let someone come up to me after church and call me a miserable sinner, and I want to punch him on the nose! (original source unknown)! The playground disputation can so often centre up on who started the incident. The meek follower of Jesus will ask themselves how can I in this situation become the one who closes the incident and restores a relationship with a fellow believer? Or how can I help these brothers or sisters resolve their differences? A meek follower of Jesus will genuinely apologise for anyway they might have contributed to the difficulties they have experienced in a relationship with another believer and will have the main aim of winning over the brother or sister not prioritizing winning an argument. The temptation can be so great to aim for the latter, but win that and lose the person – what have we gained? Our calling is not just to avoid giving offence to others but also to endeavour to seek to avoid taking offence as far as we can.

(c) **How committed am I to the authority of Scripture over my life?** In James 1:19-25 it states: *My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,* ²⁰ *because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.* ²¹ *Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly **accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*** ²² *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. **Do what it says.*** ²³ *Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror* ²⁴ *and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.* ²⁵ *But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom **and continues in it** – not forgetting what they have heard but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do.* As Christians we can be the most generous people in the world offering the teaching of God’s Word to other people as to what they should do in particular contexts, but do you, do I offer the same willingness to hear it brought into our own lives and circumstances? The honest answer is some times more than others! There are occasions when it is easy to accept and live by it and other times when it feels the hardest thing in the world when we are feeling hard done to or that life is not fair! One of the greatest strengths of King David in the Old Testament was his submission to God’s Word when he was challenged by his pastor Nathan to address issues, none more so than the time when challenged over his adultery with Bathsheba and the consequent murder of her husband Uriah, in an attempt to cover up his sinful misconduct. In II Samuel 12 the extraordinary scene is played out in which the most powerful man in the land is challenged to put his life in order –in accordance with the standards of God’s Word. The test for you and me is not when we are asking others to live in line with God’s Word but when we are the one being invited to make some necessary change to the way we have been living. Is there something I need to address today? Let’s ask the Holy Spirit to show us if He sees something that needs attention.

(d) **How do I react to fellow Christians who sin?** In II Timothy 2:24-26 Paul gave this advice to Timothy the pastor of the congregation in Ephesus. *And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome **but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.*** ²⁵ ***Opponents must be gently instructed,** in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth,*

²⁶ and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. It is not just church leaders who should have this gentle or meek disposition to addressing issues of difference of opinions or attitudes or behavioural choices, it applies to all followers of Jesus. In Galatians 6:1-2 Paul gave this advice to Christians in southern Turkey: *Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should **restore that person gently**. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.* ² **Carry each other's burdens**, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. We are all sinners who fall short of God's perfect standards and so we approach other people in Jesus' name with the full awareness of our own shortcomings and but for the grace of God know we too would have made even more mistakes than we have .

(e) **How do I approach people who have yet to come to faith?** In I Peter 3:15, a wiser and older follower of Jesus than the hasty young man who accompanied Jesus in His three year ministry wrote: *Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. **But do this with gentleness and respect**.* We don't have all the answers to life's puzzles or predicament. We don't even know all the questions! However, we come humbly in Jesus' name to suggest that we have come to know someone who does and who we wish to commend to them. Too often as Christians we have fired 'gospel missiles' at people but failed to communicate that we love respect and care for them first. If we are seen to walk the walk it is more likely that they will listen to what we have to share about our faith.

(f) **How do I react in situations of differences between Christians?** In Ephesians 4:1-3 it states: *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.* ² **Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.** ³ **Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.** How many Baptist Church meetings would pass the apostle's test here? How many of our private conversations would fall short of these standards? I hope the answer is very few or ideally none at all, but it is a spiritual discipline that we must continue to work at for the glory of God.

4. **The blessings inherited through meekness**

(a) **The context** – Jesus quotes Psalm 37:11: *But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity.* He invites us to live out this principle. Paul learned its secret as he told the Philippian Christians. *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.* ¹² *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.* ¹³ *I can do all this through Him who gives me strength* (Philippians 4:11-13).

(b) **The first reward is contentment** Agur, a man of whom we know little had this as his regular prayer in Proverbs 30:7-9: *'Two things I ask of you, Lord; do not refuse me before I die: ⁸ keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. ⁹ Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, "Who is the Lord?" Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God.* I don't need to place my hopes on the lottery or any other such thing to appreciate what I have and to understand the difference between my needs and my wants.

(c) **The second reward is gaining and keeping a sense of perspective** The things that really matter cannot be purchased with money. Sometimes we need to stop and think about the bigger picture that it is about God and about the people we love and care for; it may be someone needs your time or your love this week much more than anything of monetary value that you might

want to give to them. Our culture distorts so badly what really matters. We need to take time out sometimes and refocus on what really matters.

(d) **The third reward is gaining and maintaining an eternal perspective** In II Peter 3:13-14: the apostle wrote: *But in keeping with His promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.* ¹⁴ *So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him.* We need to stop and think when we are making major decisions and ask ourselves in the light of eternity how does this look? Just now it looks that I should go this way, but looking back at my life in the light of God's plan and purpose for me- how should I decide this matter? To see the present in the light of the future will help us focus more clearly about our future inheritance that God has prepared for us, for Jesus' sake, Amen.