

**State College Presbyterian Church  
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November 1, 2009  
All Saints' Day**

**Meek = Weak??  
Matthew 5:1-12  
Matthew 5: 17-20, 43-47**

**"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."  
Matthew 5:5**

Meek? Weak? What's the difference?

A good question for All Saints' Day – when we celebrate the “Saints who from their labors rest.” We sing of saints “faithful, bold and true.”

Can't remember ever celebrating the praises of a “meek” saint.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Words of Jesus.

Part of a series of sayings in the Sermon on the Mount which we call the Beatitudes, taking that name from the first word of each saying: “Blessed.”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

In form some think the Beatitudes resemble the Ten Commandments.

That is to say, all of the “blesseds” are short, easy to remember, and seem to carry as much weight as the Ten Commandments.

But there the similarity ends.

For what do they mean?

The Ten Commandments are clear: “Do not kill, do not steal, do not covet.”

But Jesus' aphorisms are difficult – very difficult -- to understand.

How would you know a poor in spirit if you saw one?

How does one know that she is pure in heart?

One of the most troubling Beatitudes is "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

Meek?!

Would you consider it a compliment to have some one say, "I like you because you're so meek"?

What comes to your mind?

Weak rhymes with meek.

To be meek is to be weak.

We assume that the quality of meekness is to be Sir John Milquetoast or Miss Wallflower of 1953 -- shy, retiring, stepped on -- never, ever, striking back.

That's the kind of person who is blessed?

That's the kind of person who is going to inherit the earth?

"Well, okay, if that's the case, then no thanks. **I'm** going to step right back if some one steps on me. So I guess I won't inherit!"

Jesus is often cited as the model of a meek man, yet his whipping of the money changers in the Temple wasn't meek.

His words to the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 weren't meek.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. . . You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. . . You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hellfire!"

Most of the words of Jesus don't sound meek to me.

So. . . something must be wrong with our understanding of the word.

Part of the problem might be that in Sunday School and from old hymns we picked up a certain picture of Jesus which is not the Jesus we read about in the Bible.

Unfortunately, there are few words that rhyme with "child."

So we grow up hearing about Jesus with almost a jingle like "See the little Jesus child, meek and mild." And like most jingles, you can't get it out of your mind. Whether it is true or not!

Meekness and mildness become synonymous.

Now, Jesus certainly was gentle and mild with children, and even at times with his disciples, but to put the two words together in meaning cuts off the significance of being meek.

"Mild" is not what "meek" means.

The Greek root means to "**choose to be gentle in the face of violence.**"

Notice the element of choice.

It is an **action** -- one **chooses** to be meek.

It is not a state of character one is born into.

Which leaves us with two problems -- what gentle and violent mean.

Violence is a popular subject these days.

Nations erupt in spasms of rage, terrorist bombs destroy the innocent, and the world seems to have gone mad.

Articles probe to find the reason for so much violence in our time, and blame it on T.V., the internet, computer games, or permissive parents.

Always hunting for a scapegoat.

As soon as we find the cause, we can abolish it and all will be well, they say.

Few consider that violence may be a part of us.

It is difficult to see ourselves as violent.

Since we don't shoot people or even slap them, we must be immune.

But violence comes in many forms other than physical mayhem. Some examples might help to explain.

I have a friend who taught at a boarding school of one of the most peaceful of all churches. Students were trained in non-violence. No one would ever think to strike another person. Students and faculty pride themselves on being pacifists.

As you can imagine they have a pretty poor football team.

Yet my friend says that one of the most violent places he has ever been was that school's faculty meetings.

No one leaves their seat, no voice is raised, yet violence reigns.

No blows, but the words slice cleanly like a razor and psyches lie throbbing and bleeding in the room.

Words are much more effective weapons than punching someone in the nose.

To some extent we all have learned that.

The non-words of the playground, "Na Na NaHa NaNa Na Nan" are as brutal as any blow.

The favorite indoor sport of educated people is the put down. When someone just sadly shakes his head as you talk. We all learn the art of the put down.

Different people have their own style. For some, the snicker, the sigh, or the smirk is devastating.

To seek out the soft underbelly of another person with words is a highly developed art; and it is wreaking violence on another.

Since the forms of violence are many, the ways of being gentle must be many also.

To choose to be gentle in the face of **physical** violence has many models.

Jesus' acceptance of his death on the cross and "Father, forgive them," is meek in its best sense.

He did not passively resign himself, witness the scene in Gethsemane.

Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., chose gentleness rather than physical violence.

They certainly were neither passive nor weak -- but they were gentle men.

Gentle **in order** to give room for the other person to respond rather than react.

Both King and Gandhi faced the enemy meekly in the hope and trust that the foe would then be freed to see them as human beings and to allow both of them to retain their dignity.

Generally, that may be what gentleness means.

To give room for the other person to respond rather than to react violently (in whatever form it takes).

Most of the time we react off of what is coming at us.

Husbands and wives play a game called "freeze-out."

The game is easy.

One member decides that he is angry--under no circumstances must he talk.

The other member must notice. The usual reaction is for the other to stop talking too.

The game of "freeze out" has begun and the household walks on tip-toe.

How does one meet the overwhelming silence with gentleness?

Instead of reacting with silence too, what forms of gentleness are possible so that both can retain their dignity?

A child is in an ugly mood and says angry words. The parent usually snaps back words like a whiplash -- all reaction.

How does one respond to the child in a more constructive way?

Examples could be drawn from all human relationships.

Violence is a part of us which must be recognized.

Not one of us is exempt -- we are violent.

**BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY**, we have the ability to be gentle too.

When Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek," he was not trying to reduce us all to despair because we are not meek.

The quality of meekness or gentleness is as available for us to choose as violence.

A person doesn't wake up one morning and become meek forever and ever.

**Each time we must choose** to be gentle.

Each time the response of gentleness must change, because the form of violence is different.

The angry child and frozen spouse need different forms of gentleness.

The Greek root helps to clear up the fallacy that meek equals weak, but this understanding of the Beatitudes creates more problems.

It was easier when meek **did** equal weak, because then we could say, "Since we are not weak therefore it doesn't have anything to do with us."

But what if it really is **a clear choice** to respond in gentleness?

My mind says "unfair."

I want to be Christ-like some easier way -- not have to choose every time!

It was easier when "Blessed are the meek" sounded like an impossible law which no one had to take seriously because it was unachievable.

The second Scripture lesson makes sense at this point.

Jesus is not changing the law, but adding to it.

Those who are blessed are those who **act** meekly.

The people who are the inheritors of the earth are those who **choose** to be gentle.

To be **blessed** -- to be at one with God -- is to **respond** rather than react.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.  
I still don't know what that means – completely!

But now I realize that there is some good news for all of the “Saints” in there.

The good news that we are **free to choose to be gentle**.

It is not that some of us are meek and some of us are not.

It is a matter of choice.

A matter of choice for each and every one of us.

Those who are blessed, those who are at one with God, are those who **choose** to be gentle in the face of violence.

“Blessed are the meek.”

What a wonder

Amen.