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Meekness has an important place among the qualities that describe a life transformed by the Holy Spirit. For the benefit of those concerned with getting ahead in life, Jesus remarked that the meek are a particularly happy lot, because they shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5; see Ps. 37:11).

Meekness Toward Others

Meekness is another one of those spiritual qualities that governs our relationship with other people. Like so many of these qualities, meekness is not something that can be done alone. Persons cannot be meek by themselves; they must have someone else with whom to be meek. Meekness is a way of relating to those both weaker and stronger than we are.

Toward the Least

Jesus had a lot to say about how to relate to “the least of these.” It seems that no matter what our station in life, no matter what our job or income, no matter where we find ourselves, there will always be someone lower on the totem pole than we are. No matter who we are or what age we are, there always seems to be someone with less status and power. Jesus was concerned about how we handle our strength in such a situation.

Jesus looked about Him at the synagogue and the daily life of the time in which He lived; He saw people scrambling to get the most prominent seats in the synagogue. He saw people vying for the most prominent seats at the banquet tables. He saw a generation consumed with the thirst for prestige, status, and social position. In that context, Jesus told a parable about a servant entrusted with the care and administration of a household. No sooner had the master left the house

than the servant began to usurp the master's authority. He mistreated the other servants in the household. He only seemed concerned with himself and his own sense of importance. He was charmed by his position of power and eminence. However, having the position was not enough. The servant felt obliged to make the other servants less than what they were (Luke 12:43-46).

I have a friend who used to embarrass me regularly when we went out to eat. Whenever we went to a restaurant, he harassed the waitress. Whatever she did, it was not good enough. She was not quick enough, the food was not hot enough, or he did not have enough tea. He spoke to the waitresses in short, curt comments. He had great power over this "little one." He was not meek with her.

What exactly is *meekness*? The term has a social and economic origin. How often the Bible takes ordinary marketplace words and gives them spiritual significance! Meekness described one who was in the position of a servant in the ancient world. Oddly enough, it is a term Jesus used to describe Himself. He told His disciples to forget their worries, burdens, and way of doing things. He told them to take on His life-style instead, as a yoke, and learn life from Him. And He gave them this reason: "For I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29, KJV).

Jesus wants His disciples to learn meekness from Him. Jesus said that He had come as a servant, not to be served but to serve (Matt. 20:28). This theme was one of the great prophecies of the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah declared that the Promised One, the Messiah, would come as a Suffering Servant (Isa. 53). That last night, before He was taken, Jesus gathered in the upper room with His disciples and did a strange thing. He took a basin of water and a towel, and He went from disciple to disciple washing their feet. He taught them through the experience that they were to have the attitude of a servant. It would affect how they saw themselves and how they regarded other people. He wanted His disciples to serve people, not lord it over people (Luke 12:42-48).

On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem to the cheers of the crowd acknowledging Him as King. The prophecy that foretold this entry into Jerusalem declared that He would be "meek and riding on an ass" (Matt. 21:5; see Zech. 9:9, KJV). In those days a king or an emperor entered a city to be received as lord. He would enter in a

chariot, corresponding to the modern-day tank, a weapon of war. With him would come a full compliment of armed troops, representing power, might, and the ability to rule. The Romans made a great fuss over the show of force one made upon entering a town. The continued respect for the empire depended upon a show of force. But Jesus entered Jerusalem meekly on a small animal. His entry demonstrated what the rule of Christ is like. It is a rule of gentleness with regard to people.

In his spiritual autobiography, Wayne Oates describes an episode in his early life. In front of his house, the street car tracks had a configuration to allow the street cars to bypass each other when they met. The first street car to reach the point would wait for the other one, and they would pass each other at the same time. One street car had a conductor who would laugh and talk with a little boy in that little cotton-mill village. He showed the little boy how the street car operated and answered all the questions that a little boy could think to ask. The great theologian said that he learned from the street car conductor what God is like.

God directs the world. God is powerful, just like the street car conductor who directs a street car. Yet, God is eagerly anxious to take time out for people. He wants to teach people and to laugh with them.

Meekness, however, is more than a smile on the face and a sweet word. It involves more than the superficial cordiality that people put on for social respectability. The formality of social convention can be as devoid of true meekness as overt arrogance.

When Br'er Fox and Br'er B'ar determined to eat Br'er Rabbit for supper, they knew they had to trick Br'er Rabbit because he was too fast and too clever to catch any other way. Br'er Fox knew that despite his small size, Br'er Rabbit did not have an ounce of meekness about him. That is why Br'er Fox reckoned on the plan of making a tar baby, trusting that Br'er Rabbit's lack of meekness would get him stuck.

So, Br'er Fox and Br'er B'ar made a tar baby and put the tar baby on a log beside the road. Br'er Fox put Br'er B'ar's coat and hat on it, Br'er B'ar's pipe in its mouth, and he put the buttons from Br'er B'ar's suspenders for its eyes. Sure enough, it looked like a tar baby. By and by, Br'er Rabbit came down the road. Br'er Rabbit was happy and singing as he hopped along past the tar baby.

"Mornin'," Br'er Rabbit sang out as he hopped along. But lo and behold, he stopped dead in his tracks because the tar baby did not say "mornin'" back to him. So Br'er Rabbit backed up a little bit.

"Mornin'," he sang out and proceeded on his way, knowing that the tar baby would reply. But the tar baby did not say a word. Undone by this turn of events, Br'er Rabbit backed up again.

"How come you don't say mornin' to me when I say mornin' to you?" Br'er Rabbit demanded. But the tar baby did not say a word.

"You see this fist?" Br'er Rabbit said as he made a fist. "If you don't say mornin' to me when I say mornin' to you, I'm gonna put this fist clean through your face. Mornin'!"

But the tar baby did not say a word. Br'er Rabbit was so mad that he slung his fist just as hard as he could into the tar baby's face, and it stuck fast. He got even madder then and proceeded to threaten the tar baby in a terrible way. When the tar baby would not let go of his fist, Br'er Rabbit hit the tar baby with his other fist. And before long, Br'er Rabbit found himself wrapped up in a big ball of tar.

Sometimes the lack of meekness gets people into trouble. When He sent out His disciples, Jesus warned them that they would encounter people who wanted nothing to do with them. He told them not to worry about it but to shake the dust off their feet and go on. He did not want the disciples to become embroiled with false battles like Br'er Rabbit. The haughtiness and arrogance that marked Br'er Rabbit has no place in the life of a Christian because it had no place in the life of Christ.

Br'er Rabbit had such an inflated view of himself that he was absolutely miserable if people did not regard him the way he thought he ought to be regarded. The storybook character was like Cain who grew enraged when God did not regard him highly. In Galatians 6:1, 1 Corinthians 4:21, 2 Corinthians 10:1, and 2 Timothy 2:25, Paul appealed to meekness as the basis for settling disputes between Christians—because Jesus was meek.

Toward Those in Authority

Though meekness is required of Christians in dealing with those weaker than they, it is also required in dealing with those who are stronger. Meekness is required in dealing with those whom the Bible calls the authorities. Christians are subject to the authorities (Rom.

13:1). In the face of authority, Christians face the problem of handling their weaknesses in the presence of another's strength.

Often people will relate to authority rebelliously. I have a friend who once taught mathematics in a small private school in a small Southern town made up largely of extremely wealthy families from the North. The rich immigrants came South largely because of the horse community which indulged in polo and riding to the hounds. They thrived on breeding and racing horses. Among the children in that private school were representatives of some of the wealthiest families in the country.

My friend encountered an incredible rebelliousness on the part of the children in his classroom. They enforced their rebelliousness by reminding my friend, "My father pays your salary, and I don't have to do what you say." When I was a child, we used the expression *stuck up* to describe the arrogant, haughty, and conceited attitudes that marked these children. Oddly enough, this attitude is not even based on who we are as individuals, but it is based on the merit of someone else. The children attempted to exert a power and authority they did not have, though they deluded themselves into believing they had it. In their conceit, they exempted themselves from the authority of their teacher.

The same sort of thing happened with the people who refused to listen to Jesus because they were the children of Abraham. They did not believe they needed to be taught by Jesus, and they refused to submit to His authority (John 8:31-59). This rebelliousness which refuses instruction is the very opposite of meekness.

Meekness involves teachability. In the Book of James the relationship between meekness and teachability is drawn out: "Therefore, put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (Jas. 1:21). Meekness makes learning a possibility.

The meekness of Jesus grew out of His relationship to the Father. In relation to the strength of His Father, Jesus acknowledged His own weakness. Jesus said, "I can do nothing on my own authority" (John 5:30; see 8:28). His meekness allowed Him to grow in wisdom (Luke 2:52).

Meekness as an Attitude Toward Self

If meekness involves how people relate to one another, it begins with a person's attitude toward himself or herself. Meekness requires self-acceptance. Meekness grows out of a sure acceptance of who we are. Self-esteem does not depend on exercising control over others or rebelling against the authority of others. Our worth and value as individuals stands independently of how others view our importance.

Self-Acceptance Verses Arrogance

Arrogance, on the other hand, is self-rejection. We are not satisfied with who we are. We wish we were someone else, and we wish everyone saw us as someone else. Arrogant persons need constant acknowledgment that they are important. They constantly need to prove how important and powerful they are.

Revenge is a constant theme in the subculture of the mafia. Gang wars and vendettas form the backdrop of organized crime. Respect is enforced by violence and retribution, and honor depends upon one's ability to enforce respect. In a gang war or vendetta, a gangster does not make peace for fear that it will appear as weakness.

Arrogance tends to be governed totally by the question: "What will people think of me?" This preoccupation, in a sense, gives everyone else the power to govern the arrogant person who cannot accept who he or she is. Arrogant people become stage performers who require applause, or its equivalent, from the crowd.

Such a man was Haman, grand vizier to Ahasuerus. Haman's self-esteem came from the external demonstrations of power, such as the mandatory bowing of all subordinates. Though having people bow and scrape brought a surge of exhilaration to his ego, it was only an artificial high that did not affect Haman's heart in a positive way. Quite the contrary. It was such a poor substitute for true self-esteem and self-worth that it made him feel all the worse when a single individual failed to bow to him. Haman's ruin, as recorded in the Book of Esther, stemmed from his obsession with forcing recognition from others. Haman required the artificial show of recognition because he lacked the self-assurance of those at peace with who they are. When Mordecai would not bow to Haman, none of the others who bowed could supply him with what Mordecai took away.

Arrogance drives at creating artificial props for the frail human spirit. Arrogance also supplies the creative force necessary to invent status symbols. The intellect might be clever enough to notice the foolishness of status symbols if it were not for the overwhelming emotional power of arrogance to short-circuit the mental process. Those consumed with the need to be recognized cannot exhibit meekness. Their spirits are too preoccupied with wresting admiration, adulation, and appreciation from others to ever take on the form of a servant.

Even arrogance, however, can be expressed in the costume of humility. The charade of meekness is as good a way as any of drawing attention to oneself as being worthy of the esteem of others. In *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens created the figure of Uriah Heap, a particularly despicable character who embezzled the wealth of his clients. Heap pathetically described himself as a very humble person as he deferred to others of wealth and breeding. In fact, Heap despised those to whom he deferred as he plotted his rise at the expense of their ruin. Heap reasoned that he would be as good as everyone else if he had money, then he could look down on other people.

The history of the human race is filled with people who have sought power, wealth, sex, or any of innumerable means human creativity has devised for creating the illusion of worth. The desperation of this pursuit indicates the enormity of the sense of worthlessness which most people feel. Arrogance, pride, and vanity are only emotional props to cover the emptiness. They are the fuel that generates a consumer economy in which clothing styles and automobile designs change every year. They are the reason for an advertising philosophy that makes a sensual appeal rather than an intellectual appeal. The absence of arrogance, however, does not mean the presence of meekness. Many people have come to grips with the vanity of vanities only to face the reality of their own sense of worthlessness. Without the narcotic luxury of arrogance and pride, one must live with one's own sense of inadequacy and insignificance. These are the people who thrive on self-pity. Meekness cannot be imposed, however, by life's circumstances. A meek person is never a victim of life's unfairness. Meekness is a choice made from strength, not weakness.

Self-Acceptance Verses Self-Pity

Self-pity may dress in the guise of meekness, but like arrogance, it constantly cries for attention. Self-pity leads individuals to believe that no one cares for them. They do not care for themselves, so why should anyone else? Self-pitying people accept the same values as arrogant people, but find that they cannot secure the props of status. Lacking what they believe confers worth and value, self-pitying people judge themselves to be worthless.

In the United States, sports has become the national religion and cult of a competitive, strength-oriented culture. Beauty of body and extraordinary physical performance are the focal points of worship. The handicapped, the maimed, the disfigured, or the inadequate simply suffer the judgment of worthlessness to the values of the culture. Those who accept this valuation sink into self-pity. To the same extent, those who lack the financial resources to compete in fashion, housing, and luxuries stand labeled by the community. What is worse is, when they accept the community's valuation, they fall into self-condemnation!

While Haman used power and intrigue to force recognition and attention from others, the self-pitying person uses the practiced manipulative skills of self-deprecation. The talented choir member with low self-esteem can always wrench a compliment from friends by saying, "I didn't sing very well today."

A protest will follow. As though someone held a gun to their heads, the friends will fall in line and say, "Oh, you sang beautifully." Oddly enough, when the tactic has succeeded in forcing attention from others, the poor soul feels no better.

The self-pitying person can no more express meekness than the arrogant person. Self-pity is an attitude of total preoccupation with oneself. The preoccupation revolves around what persons lack that they believe would make their lives complete—if only they had it. Self-pity is fueled by a passionate desire for the missing ingredient, and it is often accompanied by envy and jealousy of those who have the missing ingredient. The self-pitying person's misery comes from having accepted the values of the world rather than the worth of Christ. Both arrogance and self-pity betray a pathetic self-rejection.

Self-Acceptance Based on Christ

Meekness on the other hand requires a self-acceptance that does not demand constant attention and reassurance of one's importance. Meekness is the outer badge of the calm assurance that the Spirit of Christ brings. By our abiding in Christ, His Holy Spirit frees us from the desire to prove ourselves or in some way make ourselves great. He brings the satisfaction that comes with being a child of God, being made in the image of Christ. In Christ, we realize that we are a special treasure of immense value to God. So precious and valuable are we that God entered the world of pain and sorrow through His only begotten Son, bore the misery and guilt of sin on the cross, and delivered us from the rule of sin. We are worth enough for Christ to die for us. Meekness becomes a possibility when we have assurance and confidence in our relationship to the Lord.

Freed from an overwhelming preoccupation with our own standing or lack of standing, a Christian can follow the example of the Lord, who in meekness took on the form of a servant. The vain standards of recognition and importance fade in the presence of the Lord. The yearning to have attention dissolves in the love of God as the Christian abides in Christ.