

“Strength under Control”

Introduction: If you’re a horse racing fan, perhaps you remember the Kentucky Derby, 2009, and a horse named “Mine That Bird.” By all accounts, Mine That Bird had no shot. He was such a bad looking beast that his odds of winning were 50:1. Mine That Bird got such a bad start that he quickly found himself 8 lengths behind, so far back after the first ¼ mile in fact that he fell out of the range of NBC’s cameras. But remarkably, he made his way forward, to the incredible surprise of the announcer, who didn’t even call out his name until he had surged several lengths in the lead with only 50 or so yards to go. The announcer was so shocked he began to giggle! (check in out on You Tube). It was a monumental upset, the second greatest upset in Derby history. So, how did he win? Why did jockey Calvin Borel choose to ride him despite such unfavorable odds? Because, as Borel explained, Mine That Bird had a “domesticated spirit.” In other words, he was willing, he was strong enough, to totally trust the rider who had the reins of control in his hands.

I begin there today because that’s a pretty good picture of what our next Beatitude is all about. As we look at the signs of the good life according to Jesus that the Beatitudes reveal, signs that the kingdom of God has begun to take hold of us, meek is a tricky characteristic. It’s tricky because it’s perhaps one of the more misunderstood words in the English language. But one of the most accurate pictures of the word is that of a horse which has been “gentled,” a horse whose incredible strength has been brought under the control and use of the rider. As we spin that picture out into the teaching of Jesus, we want to see that to be meek is not to be wimpy or weak, but to become strong enough, by trusting God enough, to put the needs of others before our own.

For here is what the beatitude of the world looks like: “Blessed are the powerful and self-assertive,, for they will surely claw their way to the top.” In response, Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

I. Jesus the Gentleman

A. The best place to go to begin to understand meekness is with Jesus himself. In fact, Jesus uses the word to describe himself: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle [meek] and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Ma. 11:28-30). In what sense is Jesus meek? In the sense that he never used his power and authority to dominate others, but always had the best interests of others in mind. Paul in his letter to the congregation in Philippi, has one of the best observations of this. Calling the church away from selfish ambition to putting the interests of others before their own, Paul cites the example of Jesus (Phil. 2:5-7):

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant... he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

B. How was Jesus able to do this? Peter comments helpfully here as he reflects on Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, in order to give us an example to follow: “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” (1 Pe. 2:23). And the writer of Hebrews, also writing to give his readers an example to follow, encourages them to fix their eyes on Jesus. Why?

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. [Heb. 12:2-3]

C. As we ponder this, it's interesting to me that the word "weary" shows up a couple of times. What makes us so weary that Jesus offers to provide us rest from it? Among other things, he provides rest from our seemingly endless need to promote ourselves, using whatever power we can grab to elevate ourselves over others, stepping on them if we must, so that we can get ahead in life and claw our way to the top. Instead, Jesus calls us to trust that he has the reigns of our life in his hands, that he knows the racecourse better than we, and that he has awaiting us at the finish line an inheritance that last forever, that can never perish, spoil, or fade (1 Pe. 1:3-5).

Jesus was strong enough, because he trusted the Father enough, in particular the future that lay ahead of him, to put the needs of others before his own. He put the reigns of his life in the Father's hands, and he calls us to do the same. It seems to me that we could use a little more of this kind of meekness in these days in which we live.

Illustration: Among all the analysis surrounding Brexit, the vote by the British to leave the European Union, one that caught my attention was written by a British political columnist (Matthew d'Ancona, NYT, 6/25/16). He observed that in 1975, the last time the British voted on continued membership in what was then called the Common Market, mainstream politicians of the major parties joined forces with various experts and establishment figures to persuade Britons that leaving was too great a risk. They voted was to remain. But this time, 41 years later, though an almost identical strategy was adopted by the remain camp, with both the Conservative and Labor Party leaders, heavyweight economists, and world leaders like our own President urging Britons to stay, they ignored such advice and voted to leave.

I find it interesting because it's one of many examples which reveal an increasing suspicion and opposition toward all sorts of persons and institutions of authority, including the church. In part, this is because those in authority haven't done a very good job of caring for those who are feeling stepped on and stepped over by the dynamics of our increasingly global culture. It's why Donald Trump, in our own country, is getting more of a hearing that originally expected. And so, as far as the church goes, in this age when many don't believe God exists, or if he does, live as if he doesn't matter, we cannot continue, when we feel threatened, to simply proclaim the truth with our lips, making others feel bludgeoned into belief and right behavior; we must embody it with our lives. We must extend the incarnation of Jesus and live as his body, not telling others how to live but entering into their lives to listen to, learn from, and seek to meet their needs, before say anything else. Our authority, such as we have it, must be earned, relationally. To do that we must cultivate meekness, becoming strong enough, by trusting God enough, not so that we can dominate or exercise authority over others, but to put their needs before our own.

II. Cultivating Meekness: Psalm 37

A. How, then do we cultivate such meekness? How can we clothe ourselves with gentleness, which translates the same word as meekness from the list of the fruit of the Spirit and Paul's new wardrobe (Gal. 5:23; Col 3:12)? Psalm 37, from which Jesus draws this third Beatitude, provides a helpful place to start. Significantly, the readers of Psalm 37, we hear, were fretting over, and feeling threatened by, those who do evil. The psalm reveals that the wicked were using their power and wealth to take advantage of the poor. What's more, these readers were even becoming envious of those who were doing wrong, seeing them succeed in their ways (v. 7) and flourishing like luxuriant trees (v. 35). Those who sought to live a righteous, God-fearing life, it seemed, were surely losing out. They were getting stepped on and stepped over.

B. This overall context was surely was on Jesus' mind as he quoted from this psalm. And what the psalm encourages us to do is to cultivate meekness by trusting in the LORD and doing good. We are to take delight in the LORD and commit our way to him. We are to be still and patient before the LORD, refraining from anger and not fretting. In these ways, we can find our joy and sense of identity not in what we do but in who God says we are—beloved. This identity

frees us to seek the good of others, come what may. We let the chips fly and do what is right, leaving the outcome to God. We pray for our enemies and rest in the promise that God has a future in store for us beyond what we could ever imagine or manufacture for ourselves.

C. And how do we do all of that? Because in the midst of it all, we read that the LORD laughs at the wicked! [Picture of Laughing Jesus] Why? Because he knows the racecourse better than we. He knows the wicked's day is coming. He laughs, not in a mean way—he wants no one to perish—but in a way that declares, like his laughter in Psalm 2, “if you think you can live without me, outside of my will and ways, if you think you can throw off my reigns, you are wrong. I am totally in control, despite what it may look like at the ¼ mile mark. Ponder the cross and the empty tomb and you will see what I mean.” So may we embrace what it means to be meek. May we embody the way Jesus lived in his body. And may we become strong enough, by trusting God enough, to put the interests of others before our own.