

# *Strength Under Control*

## *(Matthew 5:5)*

**A**re you impatient, overbearing, or hot-tempered? Then listen as Jesus gives the third requirement for happiness-plus: “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). Many people are familiar with the KJV wording: “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.”<sup>1</sup>

The world attaches little value to being gentle and meek. The beatitudes of the world are more like this: “Blessed are those who assert themselves, for they shall get their way”; “Blessed are those who promote themselves, for they shall be noticed”; “Blessed are the aggressive, for they shall succeed.” Nevertheless, Jesus said, “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.”

The last part of that promise—“they shall inherit the earth”—has fueled imaginations and produced considerable controversy. What did Jesus mean when He said that the gentle and meek shall inherit the earth? Further, what does being gentle and meek have to do with our being happy? We will consider these questions in this lesson.

### **“BLESSED ARE THE GENTLE. . . .”**

#### **Explanation**

We first need to determine the biblical meaning of the word translated “gentle” in the NASB and “meek” in the KJV. Unlike the previous presentations in this series, we will begin

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<sup>1</sup>The NASB usually translates the Greek word for “gentle/meek” as “gentle,” but occasionally this version renders a form of the word as “meekness” (see 2 Corinthians 10:1).

with the positive and then go to the negative: First, we will see what the Greek word means, and then we will think about what it does not mean.

What “gentleness/meekness” is. The word translated “gentle” or “meek” is *πραῦς* (*praus*). Joseph Henry Thayer’s lexicon defines *praus* as “gentle, mild, meek.”<sup>2</sup> The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) said that *praus* is halfway between “bad temper” and “spineless incompetence”—the middle ground “between extreme anger and indifference.”<sup>3</sup> Hugo McCord wrote,

When [*praus* was] used of animals, the Greeks had the meaning of taming. When they used the word of sound they meant it was gentle and soft. When they used it of persons they meant the people were meek and gentle.<sup>4</sup>

Let us begin our discussion of *praus* by noting the need for gentleness. Christians are to “put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, *gentleness* and patience” (Colossians 3:12; emphasis mine). As we teach the gospel and attempt to rescue the lost, we should do so “in a spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1; see 2 Timothy 2:25; 1 Peter 3:15). “Gentleness” is

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<sup>2</sup>C. G. Wilke and Wilibald Grimm, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and rev. Joseph H. Thayer (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1977), 534.

<sup>3</sup>Adapted from Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich; trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, abr. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 930.

<sup>4</sup>Hugo McCord, *Happiness Guaranteed* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Dehoff Publications, 1956), 23.

translated from a form of *praus*. In the US we have a word that has largely lost its original meaning: “gentleman.” Today, that word is primarily used to distinguish between a male and a female, but at one time it referred to a man who was actually gentle in dealing with others. The Bible teaches that we all need to be gentle men<sup>5</sup> and gentle women.

Gentleness is the beginning point of understanding the meaning of *praus*, but not the end. In the Old Testament, this prophecy was given regarding the Messiah:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
He is just and endowed with salvation,  
*Humble*, and mounted on a donkey,  
Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey  
(Zechariah 9:9; emphasis mine).

This passage was fulfilled in Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In his Gospel Account, Matthew quoted this prophecy, but notice the word He used instead of “humble”:

“Say to the daughter of Zion,  
‘Behold your King is coming to you,  
*Gentle* [from *praus*], and mounted on a donkey,  
Even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden”  
(Matthew 21:5; emphasis mine).

Where Zechariah used the word “humble,” Matthew used the word “gentle.” Gentleness/meekness has the element of humility. In James 1:21 the NASB translates the noun form of *praus* as “humility”: “In humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.” W. E. Vine noted that “it is only the humble heart which is also the meek”<sup>6</sup> and gentle. In Zechariah 9:9, instead of “humility,” the KJV has “lowly,” so McCord defined meekness as “gentle lowliness.”<sup>7</sup>

Regarding *praus*, Jesus had in mind the qualities of gentleness and humility—but our understanding is not yet complete. Also implied in *praus* is the trait of being agreeable, compliant, even yielding. The person with such a

spirit is willing to yield to the Lord. Vine noted,

[The expressions of *praus*] are first and chiefly towards *God*. It is that temper of spirit in which we accept His dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting; it . . . does not fight against God and . . . struggle and contend with Him.<sup>8</sup>

A Greek dictionary says, “In [Matthew] 5:5, the meek to whom the inheritance is promised are those who acknowledge the great and gracious will of God.”<sup>9</sup>

In this series we are emphasizing the logical progression of the Beatitudes. One sees himself as nothing (the first beatitude) and God as everything. He mourns over his spiritual condition (the second beatitude), which causes him to repent and turn to God. Then his spiritual poverty and deep sorrow result in a gentle, meek, yielding spirit (the third beatitude), which accepts God’s will without question.

Having a spirit that is compliant toward God also benefits our relationships with others. Paul told Titus to remind Christians “to be peaceable, *gentle* [a form of *praus*], showing every consideration for all men” (Titus 3:1, 2; emphasis mine). The gentle/meek Christian does not insist on having his own way. He takes into account the needs and feelings of others.

How, then, might we define the gentleness or meekness of Matthew 5:5? It is a humble spirit that yields to the will of God and deals kindly with others.

What “gentleness/meekness” is not. Having discussed what *praus* is, we are ready to reach several conclusions regarding what *praus* is not. First, it should now be obvious that *praus* is not a *weak* quality. Years ago, when most people used the KJV, some wondered about the word “meek.” To them, being meek meant that a person was timid and afraid to stand up for himself, that he allowed people to mistreat him and take advantage of him. Modern translations use other terms—such as “gentle” in the NASB—but most would also view a gentle person as the opposite of a strong person.

Remember that the Greeks used *praus* in

<sup>5</sup>When I think of “gentle men,” my mind goes to the Christian gentleman Hugo McCord.

<sup>6</sup>W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 401.

<sup>7</sup>McCord, 23–24.

<sup>8</sup>Vine, 401 (emphasis mine).

<sup>9</sup>Bromiley, 930.

speaking of *taming* animals. When I think of taming animals, I think of breaking wild horses to be ridden. When a horse is broken to ride, none of his strength is destroyed. Instead, the horse's strength becomes *controlled*. The gentleness/meekness of Matthew 5:5 can be thought of as "strength under control."<sup>10</sup> Regarding our relationship with the Lord, *praus* can be defined as "strength tempered by reverence."

Second, *praus* is not an attitude of mind that is tolerant of anything and everything, even that which is wrong and immoral. Some people are thought of as meek and gentle because they never disagree with anyone. They go to great lengths to avoid any kind of unpleasantness. It is true that the gentleness/meekness of Matthew 5:5 implies an individual who seeks peace (see v. 9), but this does not mean that he is indulgent of evil. To fail to oppose sin and error is not gentleness/meekness. According to D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, that is just "flabbiness."<sup>11</sup>

Third, *praus* is not a "natural" disposition of mind. It is true that some individuals naturally exhibit some of the characteristics of meekness and gentleness. These individuals are sometimes referred to as "mild-mannered." This is not what Jesus had in mind when He used the word *praus*. Jesus was advocating a quality that *every* Christian needs to develop, whether or not he or she is "naturally inclined" to it. He was speaking of an attribute that requires divine help to develop. In Galatians 5:22, 23, Paul spoke of "the fruit of the Spirit." Included in Paul's list of fruit is "gentleness," or "meekness" (v. 23). We become gentle/meek people in the biblical sense only as we yield ourselves to the Lord and let His Spirit work in our lives.

### Examples

By now you can see that *praus* is a rather complex word. Perhaps it would help our understanding of this word if we saw biblical

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<sup>10</sup>A similar explanation is given in William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 91–92.

<sup>11</sup>D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), 67.

examples of it. Many examples can be found in the Scriptures,<sup>12</sup> but we will confine ourselves to two examples, one in the Old Testament and one in the New.<sup>13</sup>

In the Old Testament, we read in Numbers 12:3, "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth." The KJV has "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth." In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, a form of *praus* is used to describe Moses in this text.

Think about what you know of Moses. He was the meekest man alive, but was he weak? Could a weak man have led two to three million people out of Egypt? Moses was gentle and meek, but I remember occasions when his temper flared.<sup>14</sup> I doubt that meekness was his *natural* disposition. Nevertheless, he had the qualities we have discussed. He had yielded his spirit to God's spirit, and that affected how he treated others. He was not gentle or meek when it came to opposing disobedience to God, but he was still characterized by humility.

Two illustrations from Moses' life should suffice. In Numbers 11 a young man ran to Moses to report that two men were prophesying in the camp (vv. 26, 27). A proud leader might have protested, "Who gave them permission?" Joshua said, "Moses, my lord, restrain them" (v. 28). Moses humbly replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!" (v. 29).

In chapter 12 (the chapter in which we read about Moses' humility/meekness), Miriam and Aaron spoke harshly about their brother (vv. 1, 2). The Lord rebuked the two (vv. 4–9) and punished Miriam, who evidently had been the leader of the criticism<sup>15</sup> (v. 10). If I had been Moses, I might have said, "It's no more than she deserves." Instead, he prayed for his sister:

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<sup>12</sup>Other examples used by writers include Jeremiah, David, Peter, Stephen, and Paul.

<sup>13</sup>Many sermons on meekness spend most of their time on biblical examples, such as Moses, Christ, and others. You may want to expand this section.

<sup>14</sup>Moses killed the Egyptian taskmaster, broke the first set of the tablets of stone, and struck a rock instead of speaking to it.

<sup>15</sup>Notice that Miriam is listed first in Numbers 12:1. Aaron was generally a follower.

“O God, heal her, I pray!” (v. 13). No wonder Moses was such a great leader.

Turning to the New Testament, we find the greatest example of gentleness/meekness anywhere, anytime: Jesus Christ. Earlier, we read Matthew 21:5, which refers to the Messiah as “gentle” (*praus*). In 2 Corinthians 10:1, Paul referred to “the meekness [from *praus*] and gentleness of Christ.” Jesus Himself said, “I am gentle [*praus*] and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). Was Jesus weak? Think about the money changers in the temple scrambling to get out of His way (John 2:13–17). Was Jesus tolerant of evil? Did He avoid unpleasantness at all cost? Consider His scathing denunciation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23.

Why was Jesus described as “gentle” or “meek”? He had totally yielded His will to that of the Father (John 6:38; see Matthew 26:39). He had emptied Himself of divine rights and privileges and had become a servant to God and mankind (Philippians 2:5–8). He was not concerned about self, but was concerned about others (see Matthew 20:28). He was therefore gentle in dealing with the lost. He was known as “a friend of . . . sinners!” (Matthew 11:19).

A striking example of Jesus’ meekness and gentleness is found in John 8:1–11.<sup>16</sup> The scribes and the Pharisees, trying to trap Jesus, brought an adulterous woman to Him.<sup>17</sup> After Jesus evaded their trap and the woman’s accusers left, He asked her, “Did no one condemn you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” Then Jesus said gently, “I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more” (vv. 10, 11). Jesus was strong, but His strength was controlled. It was tempered by reverence for God and love for people. That is what the gentleness/meekness of Matthew 5:5 is all about.

### “. . . FOR THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH.”

Jesus said that those who have this attribute are “blessed.” They have happiness-plus. What does gentleness/meekness have to do with hap-

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<sup>16</sup>This passage is not found in some of the oldest manuscripts. It is therefore put in brackets by the NASB translators. Most agree, however, that the incident probably occurred as recorded.

<sup>17</sup>You may want to take the time to tell the story in its entirety.

piness? As was true regarding the previous beatitudes, the attitude itself is conducive to being truly happy—because the gentle/meek person thinks more about the needs of others than his own needs. Therefore, unlike most people in the world, he is not filled with discontent over the failure of others to meet his needs. Once again, however, the emphasis in our text is on happiness as a result of the promise.

The promise in Matthew 5:5 is striking: “Blessed are the gentle, *for they shall inherit the earth.*” What does this mean? In what sense do the gentle/meek “inherit the earth”?

### What the Promise Does *Not* Mean

This promise does *not* mean that those who are gentle and meek will inherit the earth in a legal sense. Consider the two examples of gentleness/meekness we discussed: Moses and Jesus. McCord wrote,

If anyone were to think that this literal earth is what Jesus had in mind, then the meekest man who ever lived failed to receive the promise. Moses wandered with no home for forty years hoping to inherit the promised land, but he only got to look at it [Deuteronomy 34:1–5]. The Bible tells us also that Jesus was a meek man and yet far from inheriting the earth literally. [Jesus] said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the son of man hath not where to lay his head” [see Luke 9:58; KJV].<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, in my files, I have letters and articles in which people contend that Christians will one day own legal title to the physical earth. Their favorite text is Matthew 5:5: “Blessed are the gentle [or meek], for they shall inherit the earth.” For instance, there are premillennialists who make this promise part of their end-times scenario. They say that Jesus will return to the earth and reign in a physical way for a thousand years. During that time, they insist, God’s children will inherit the earth.

Then there are those who teach that only 144,000 will go to heaven, while the rest of God’s people will live forever on the earth. Two who hold this belief came to my door one day. They described an earth cleansed of sin and wickedness, an earth with no sickness and death, an earth filled with happiness. “Isn’t that

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<sup>18</sup>McCord, 26.

exciting?" they asked. "Actually, it is somewhat disappointing," I replied. "I've been looking forward to *new* heavens and a *new* earth [2 Peter 3:13; see Revelation 21:1], and all you have promised me is a patched-up, remodeled earth. Even a child knows the difference between new clothing and patched-up clothing."

The Bible does not teach that the gentle and meek will inherit the earth as a legal possession now; nor does it say that they will possess it in that sense later. Peter wrote that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, *and the earth and its works will be burned up*" (2 Peter 3:10; emphasis mine).

### What the Promise Does Mean

What, then, does the promise mean? In what sense do the meek and gentle inherit the earth? As was the case with the promises already studied, the promise is not physical in nature, but *spiritual*. The disciples of Jesus were hoping the Messiah would be a military leader who would conquer the earth and then give it to them to rule. Jesus dashed those hopes when He said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

However, even if we agree that the promise is spiritual in nature, that still leaves the matter of whether "the earth" in our text has to do with this life or the life to come. Some insist that the promise has reference to this life only. Others insist just as strongly that the promise cannot refer to this life, so it must be talking about the one to come. Let me again suggest that the promise will have a twofold fulfillment: partial fulfillment in this life and complete fulfillment in the life to come.

*In this life.* In the Old Testament, David used basically the same language used by Jesus in Matthew 5:5 when he wrote, "But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity" (Psalm 37:11). In the KJV the similarity of the first part of that verse to the third beatitude is even more striking: "But the meek shall inherit the earth." In Psalm 37 the humble/meek are those who trust in the Lord (v. 3) and patiently wait for Him to punish evildoers (vv. 7–9). Of greatest interest to us, however, is the word "land" [NASB] or "earth" [KJV]. In the psalm the land/earth refers to the

geographical area known as the land of Canaan. Only the humble and meek, David insisted, would enjoy the blessings in that land. Even so, I believe that it is only the gentle and meek who have the capacity to enjoy the blessings of this present earth to the fullest extent.

It is the gentle and meek Christian who inherits the earth "in terms of inheriting the richest, fullest, and most satisfying life that this earth can give."<sup>19</sup> Paul spoke of this kind of life when he referred to himself "as having nothing yet possessing all things" (2 Corinthians 6:10). He gave the Corinthians this assurance:

... For *all things* belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas *or the world* or life or death or things present or things to come; *all things* belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God (1 Corinthians 3:21–23; emphasis mine).

"All worthwhile things of this world are the possession of the meek. They may not legally own a square inch of land, but they recognize that the entire earth is Jehovah's and that all its beauty and grandeur is theirs to enjoy."<sup>20</sup>

Shortly before I preached on the Beatitudes for the first time, I attended the funeral of a member of the church at Comanche, Oklahoma: Jewel Thomas. He was a humble man, a farmer. His funeral was held in the spacious high school auditorium. Every seat was filled, and people were standing along the walls. One of the texts read at the service was Matthew 5:5: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (KJV). For the first time, that text took on special meaning for me. Brother Thomas was not a rich man; but he had inherited the true blessings of this life, including the respect of the entire community. George MacDonald wrote,

Which is more the possessor of the world—he who has a thousand houses, or he who, without one house to call his own, has ten in which his knock at the door would rouse instant jubilation? Which is the richer, the man who, his large money spent, would have no refuge; or he for whose necessity a hundred would sacrifice comfort?<sup>21</sup>

Most of us probably know of individuals

<sup>19</sup>Joe Schubert, "The Meek," *Resources* 2 (1981): 13.

<sup>20</sup>James M. Tolle, *The Beatitudes* (Fullerton, Calif.: Tolle Publications, 1966), 42.

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Tolle, 43.

with great wealth who are miserable, as well as those with little who are happy. It is not the abundance of possessions that makes us happy, but our attitude toward life. Don Humphrey noted that the “real enjoyment of blessings is for those who hold earthly things lightly, who rank them inferior to spiritual blessings.” He noted that a meek person is not burdened by his possessions and is not consumed by the fear of losing those possessions.<sup>22</sup>

*In the life to come.* More could be said about the gentle and meek inheriting the best this earth has to offer, but let us turn our attention to the life to come. As is the case with all the Beatitudes, the ultimate fulfillment of this promise will be in heaven. In Hebrews 11 we read concerning the heroes of faith,

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. . . . But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them (vv. 13–16).

Two chapters later, the writer said, “For here [on this earth] we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come [that is, in heaven]” (13:14; see Revelation 21:2, 10).

In Romans 8 Paul wrote about our spiritual inheritance. He said that we are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him” (v. 17). He recognized that our blessings in this life will always be mixed with suffering, so he looked forward to the life to come. He said, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (v. 18). As he neared the end of his life, he wrote, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (2 Timothy 4:18).

The ultimate and final fulfillment of the promise to “inherit the earth” will come in “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1; emphasis mine; see 2 Peter 3:13)—the abode of

God Himself in heaven. There can be no greater incentive to strive to be what we should be.

## CONCLUSION

“Blessed are the gentle [or the meek], for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). Do you want to “inherit” the earth—to enjoy the best of what this earth has to offer *and* look forward to the “new earth”? Then you must be gentle and meek.

Remember that gentleness and meekness involve more than just speaking softly and being kind to others. Some consider this to be the most difficult of the Beatitudes because it involves total submission to the will of God. The proud person says to God, “I don’t need You and I don’t need Your way.” The gentle/meek person says, “God, I recognize my weakness and realize that I have nothing of value to offer You; but I am thankful that You loved me, gave Your Son to die for me, and then made the way of salvation clear. Now I humbly submit to Your will.” If you are not a child of God, or if you are an unfaithful child, show your humility by coming to the Lord today.

### • Notes •

When you use this sermon, you will want to tell your listeners how to “come to the Lord.” Those who are not yet children of God need to believe in Jesus, repent of their sins, confess His name, and be buried in baptism (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Romans 10:9, 10; 6:3–6). Unfaithful children need to confess their sins and pray to God (Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9; James 5:16).

The word “meek,” as used in the KJV in Matthew 5:5, has a negative connotation in the minds of some today. This may be why the NASB translators used the word “gentle” instead of “meek.” Vine viewed “meekness” as the best translation, observing, “. . . as *prautes* [the noun form of *praus*] describes a condition of mind and heart, and as ‘gentleness’ is appropriate rather to actions, this word is no better. . . .”<sup>23</sup> Because of the difficulty of exactly translating *praus*, I used both “gentle” and “meek” throughout the presentation.

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<sup>22</sup>Adapted from Don Humphrey, *The Beatitudes* (Burlington, Mass.: Eternity Press, 1969), 31.

<sup>23</sup>Vine, 401.