

## Blessed Are the Meek ...

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.” (MT 5:5)

What does it mean to be meek? A dictionary definition reads: “characterized by patience and long-suffering,” then adds a second meaning: “deficient in spirit and courage.” The first reflects a certain nobility and strength of character; the second, a lack of virtuous traits. So which is it? Let’s look at the biblical context of the statement.

This beatitude is not the first expression of this idea. Psalm 37:11 has almost identical wording: “But the meek shall possess the land, they shall delight in abounding peace.” The theme of this Psalm is to do good and avoid evil, trusting in God, who will punish the evildoer and reward the just person. Six times the Psalmist describes the persons who will possess the land – those who trust in the Lord and do good (vs. 3), those who wait for the Lord (9), the meek (11), those whom God blesses (22), the just (29), and those who wait for the Lord and keep his way (34). Clearly the meek are those who are patient and long-suffering. They do not lack courage, but remain faithful to the Lord, even when they must bravely endure misfortune or evil actions against them.

In a later section of the Sermon on the Mount (which begins with the Beatitudes), Jesus describes meekness (without explicitly using the term) when he rebuts the “equal retaliation” rule of Leviticus 24:20 (“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”) by stating, “But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.” (Mt 5:39-42)

Patient, long-suffering, docile – even in the face of provocation – these are included in meekness. Underlying these traits and making them virtuous is the person’s trust in the Lord. That’s why the meek act as they do – they accept God’s call to love, to renounce violence, trusting that God will administer justice in the end. The meek are not weak – they have a quiet strength from confidence in God. For this “they will inherit the land.”

And what land is this? When the Psalmist wrote his song of justice, he probably had in mind the Promised Land of Israel, for God’s covenant consisted of not only His lasting fidelity to the community, but also the land they inhabited – “You shall live in the land I gave your fathers; you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Ezek 36:28).

Jesus expands this concept of land from the physical reality of Palestine to the spiritual realm of God’s Kingdom, for that was the subject of his teaching. Just as covenant fidelity would be rewarded by a good life in the Promised Land, so meekness – a patient and long-suffering trust in God – will be rewarded by the inheritance of God’s Kingdom.

That the meek would be so blessed runs counter to the world’s expectation that the bold and assertive are the ones who gain power and possessions. But we can see in the meekness with which Jesus suffered his Passion and death a challenge and a model for our own transformation into God’s People, inheritors of the Kingdom.