

Blessed are the Meek...
Blessed are the Mourners...
by Rev. Chase Peebles

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ (Luke 4:14-21, NRSV)

Throughout my life, I’ve had the experience of being offended by quite a few would-be prophets. For instance, I remember the time I was at a Christian music concert and a speaker made a crack about his hopes for then President Clinton to die in a plane crash, which was followed by a loud chorus of “Amen.” I can remember plenty of other folks who considered themselves to be prophets and their claims about what the “Christian” point of view was on a given subject (abortion, women’s rights, patriotism, etc.). Most of them offended me and I remain offended to this day by their words.

However, I can remember a few times when I was troubled and even offended by a would-be prophet and later came to agree with her or him. I guess you could say that I was troubled not because of statements I considered ignorant or hateful, but because they pricked my conscience. I was uncomfortable with what they were asking me to consider and afraid because of what their words might mean for my comfortable way of looking at the world.

I’ve alluded before in a sermon to the efforts of a young campus minister at my college (who shall remain nameless, although he currently is a minister at a Congregational church in a town on the north shore of Long Island). At a Baptist Student Union meeting, he had students act out a different version of The Parable of the Good Samaritan. In his version, an American was helped by a good Iraqi. Did I mention that this skit took place

soon after the first Gulf War? I remember thinking, “Okay, I get the point, but why did you have to go there?” I didn’t really want to see Iraqis as good guys.

Another such example that was even more troubling for me occurred in seminary. A fellow student of mine named Trish preached in chapel and her sermon was entirely on the subject of homosexuality. Now Trish was one of those people who always had a cause, whether it was feminism, world peace, the environment or something like that. Often I would feel worn out in her presence, because I just couldn’t carry the burdens of the world with me all the time in the same way she did. In this sermon she read statements from her friends who happened to be gay or lesbian about how they had been ostracized and condemned by the Church in general and also by specific Christians. Hearing the pain of people who have been kicked out of their religious tradition for being who they were born to be did not make for an enjoyable sermon. I remember thinking, “Trish, why did you have to go there?” I knew that God’s love extended to everyone, but why homosexuals? The whole topic was one I’d just rather not deal with.

A few years later, when I actually had some gay and lesbian friends and other friends of mine who were already gay finally felt comfortable telling me, I began to realize the truth of Trish’s sermon. God’s grace extended far beyond my comfort zone and included people that I had previously wished I could ignore. It’s not easy to admit your own prejudices.

So, when we come to tonight’s scripture passage, I’m sympathetic with the congregation which had a difficult time hearing a troubling sermon. In it, we find Jesus reading scripture at his home-town synagogue. Jesus declares that the Messianic predictions of the prophets have been fulfilled by God in him, and if that wasn’t blasphemous enough, he states that God’s kingdom comes first to the poor, the sick, the oppressed and the Gentiles! The audience is shocked that Jesus would announce that God placed a priority upon people that they cared so little about. Quickly, Jesus is run out of town on a rail but slips away before he can be thrown off of a cliff.

It’s tough to hear that God’s love extends to those you don’t love. It’s threatening to realize that God may be most concerned with those we think the least about. It is uncomfortable to have your conscience pricked and your prejudices pointed out. I have sympathy for those who heard Jesus that day.

The language that Jesus used in his first sermon and that is used in the Beatitudes comes out of the Prophets of Israel. In Isaiah 61 referred to in both Luke 4 and Matthew 5, God anoints a Messiah to bind up the brokenhearted, bring good news to the oppressed, proclaim liberty to the captives, comfort those who mourn, and strength to the weak. What was spoken of in a future sense, we find described in the present tense by Jesus.

Tonight’s Beatitudes are:

Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.

And, Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

It's important to note that Jesus is describing an objective reality, not a hope or a dream. Jesus' language is not ordinary language. Scholars have called it "Unconditional Performative Language." M. Eugene Boring describes the language of the Beatitudes,

The beatitudes are written in unconditional performative language. (Examples of performative language are a baseball umpire's calling balls and strikes, a minister's pronouncing a couple husband and wife, a judge's pronouncing of sentence, etc.) They do not merely describe something that already is, but bring into being the reality they declare.¹

Those who are meek and who mourn are blessed because Jesus says so. But in what way are they blessed? The answer can be found by examining the cause of the mourning Jesus mentions and the definition of the word "meek" that Jesus uses.

I remember reading somewhere of a t-shirt slogan that said "The meek shall inherit the earth, but the rest of us shall go to the stars." This may be just the expression of counter-cultural longing in the same vein as Joni Mitchell's *Woodstock* ("We are stardust..."), but it raises the point of how "meekness" has become an unattractive personality trait and "the earth" has become understood in some circles as polluted and corrupt. Is Jesus saying that if we are pushovers then we will get a leftover and used up world? How can we be blessed if that is the case?

This beatitude is a great example of how Bible translation affects our understanding of the teachings of Jesus. The Greek word *praus* which is translated as "meek" has several meanings, none of which corresponds to our modern negative understanding of the word "meek." Aristotle understood *praus* as the middle way between being prone to excessive anger and an incapacity for anger.² In other words, *praus* describes the quality of being in control of your emotions and expressing them in appropriate ways. William Barclay understood this Beatitude to mean, "Blessed is the [person] who is always angry at the right time, and never angry at the wrong time."³

This understanding of *praus* coincides with its usage to describe animals which have been domesticated (e.g. oxen or plough horses).⁴ They are powerful but remain under the control of their master in order to accomplish the master's goals. In the case of Christians, we are called to be under the control of our master, Christ. In fact, Jesus uses the word *praus* and the imagery of a yoke together when he says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke

¹ M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 177.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.1108a. For a helpful description of this word and its usage elsewhere in the New Testament, see William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 354.

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, rev. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 96.

⁴E.g. Isocrates 9.67, Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.4.9, etc..

upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle (*praus*) and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:29 NRSV)

Jesus does not call us to be weaklings or pushovers. Instead, he calls us to put our desires and abilities under his control. Jesus both describes himself and is described⁵ with the word *praus*, but he is anything but a wimp.⁶ This is the man who hung out with fishermen, overturned the tables of moneychangers and faced down the political and religious authorities of his day. Yet, Jesus exhibited the virtue of *praus* by undergoing the pain of death on a cross for the greater good of the removal of the judgment due humanity. He had the power and the ability to dominate his adversaries, but he submitted himself to them for a greater purpose. In the same way, we are called to submit ourselves to Christ for the greater purposes of God.

So, what is our reward for our submission to Christ? The background of this beatitude lies in Psalm 37:11, where in a discussion of God’s punishment of the wicked who oppress others lays the promise, “But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” (NRSV) Jesus adapts this idea and transforms the promise of the Promised Land given to ancient Israel into a promise of the Kingdom of God to his followers. Our inheritance from God is not a piece of real estate but inclusion into the family of God.

In a similar way, the mourning that Jesus refers to is no ordinary grief but a profound understanding of the pain that exists in our world. Jesus’ mention of mourning places him in the long tradition of the Psalms and prophets who grieved over the oppression of God’s people by the wicked.⁷ In Isaiah 61, the passage that Jesus read in the synagogue, the prophet declares that God’s anointed one will comfort those who mourn the destruction of Israel. Once again, Jesus reinterprets this passage to describe his own followers. He offers the promise of blessing upon those who are concerned about the oppression of others.

Jesus words are not a call to passivity. He does not say, “Blessed are those who see the problems of the world and give up all hope of doing anything about it.” Jesus lamented the state of his world, yet his grief did not become despair. He continued to work for its improvement. In the same way, our concern for the oppression of the world need not result in fatalism. Instead, our concern should provoke us to action. Clarence Jordan, the scholar and social activist, wrote,

⁵See 2 Corinthians 10:1 where Paul writes of the “gentleness (*praus*) and kindness of Christ.” For a helpful discussion of this verse see Victor Paul Furnish, *2 Corinthians* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 455.

⁶ In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, both David (Psalm 131:1) and Moses (Sirach 45:4) are described with forms of the word *praus*. Certainly, neither of them could be thought of as pushovers.

⁷ Boring, “Matthew,” 179.

Those people are not real mourners who say, “Sure, the world’s in a mess, and I guess maybe I’m a bit guilty like everybody else, but what can I do about it?” What they’re really saying is that they are not concerned enough about themselves or the world to *look* for anything to do. No great burden hangs on their hearts. They aren’t grieved. They don’t mourn...So the mourners are really those who are *concerned to the point of action*.⁸

Jesus blesses our grief over our world, because it is the motivation for our efforts to heal that pain.

Behind the promise of “for they shall be comforted” lays the implicit claim that God is the one who shall do the comforting.⁹ Our concern for the problems of our world shall be transformed by God, so that we are not overwhelmed. Instead, we become a part of God’s great solution to the ills of our world.

We are called to lives where our consciences are constantly pricked and where we wrestle with the words of prophets. In both of these Beatitudes, our common understandings of “mourning” and “meekness” are called into question. Jesus does not call the Christian to stand by and let the world pass us by. Jesus calls us to submit ourselves to God and the direction of Christ. With God in control of our lives, our eyes are opened to the needs of the world and our hands and feet are directed to meet those needs.

Written by Rev. Chase Peebles
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⁸ Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1952), 25.

⁹ Boring, “Matthew,” 179.