

The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

BY ARTHUR SIMON

We affluent Christians accept our comparative luxury and consider so little the suffering of others. Surely the spirit of mammon lives not only within the secular culture, but also within the church and within us. We want our piece of the earth. But, says Jesus, it is the meek who inherit the earth.

Jesus was remarkably out of step with prevailing values. It was true then; it is true today. The rich and powerful are in deep trouble with God, he said. The poor, the lowly, and the despised are honored and welcome in the kingdom. The affluent are no less welcome, but they have to leave their baggage behind.

The call of Jesus and his invitation to the kingdom is good news for everyone, but it goes to everyone on the same terms. Both rich and poor, devout and derelict need to repent, to trust God with all their heart, and to let go of anything that imprisons them—money, pride, worry, hopelessness, whatever it may be. The rich are asked to humble themselves before God, the poor to believe they are exalted in Christ. All of us are asked to do both.

That is not exactly the wisdom of the world.

In our world, it is clearly those with money, power, and talent who get ahead. Yet Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5)¹. The beatitudes reflect a fundamental paradox: Mammon is ours, the earth is ours, life is ours—if we return them to God. This is nonsense to the world, which knows that “to the victor belong the spoils.”

I heard a radio interview with an author of a book about insider-trading scandals on Wall Street. He said there are two sets of conflicting messages that Americans hear, starting in childhood. One says, "Do good, be honest, and obey the law." The other says, "Take what you can for yourself." In the world of male achievers, he observed, the second of the two messages predominates. For example, what do fraternity brothers talk about when they sit down for a beer? Does anyone ever say, "I had a chance to make a killing, but I decided to be honest instead?" No, they brag about how they have made a killing. The same applies when they move out into the world that includes Wall Street. They want to make it. There is even something exciting about leading a double life—outwardly a conservative, respectable businessman but inwardly working all the angles to get rich. People seldom ask, "How did you make the money?" They just say, "He made a bundle and is a great success."

A similar application could be made regarding sexual values and behavior, or the pursuit of fame, or power. I describe the culture of mammon a bit crassly. Perhaps most of us want to make it, to enjoy the symbols of success, but hope to do it honestly. When my oldest son, Nathan, was a teenager, he told me that he had decided to become a stockbroker, a millionaire by age thirty, and retire in the Bahamas. I told him I would be deeply hurt to see him fail so badly. (At age thirty, struggling to support a family, he thanked me for the conversation.)

The world tells us that the aggressive inherit the earth, and we are probably inclined to believe that it is so. A cartoon in the *The New Yorker* showed a portly man and his wife admiring scenic fields and trees through the picture window of their living room. The man says: "God's country? Well, I suppose it is. But I own it."² We laugh because the man is a caricature of ourselves.

It still jars me to see how casually we affluent Christians accept our own comparative luxury, while others have almost nothing. I am appalled that I take my own privileges largely for granted and consider so little the suffering of others. Surely the spirit of mammon lives not only within the secular carriers of culture, but also within the church, within ourselves. We want our piece of the earth.

But, says Jesus, it is the meek who inherit the earth.

WHO ARE THE MEEK?

Webster's New World Dictionary defines meek as (1) patient and mild; not inclined to anger or resentment; and (2) too submissive; easily imposed on; spineless; spiritless. The second definition probably gives the most common understanding—"meek" is not usually a compliment—but it is laughable to think that Jesus meant to applaud the spineless. The first definition is clearly related to what Jesus had in mind. But is that all he meant by meek?

Psalm 37, from which the Beatitude is taken, urges trust in the Lord despite the apparent success of wicked men. Soon the wicked will be no more, the psalmist says. “But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace” (v. 11). The psalmist also promises inheritance of the land to “those who hope in the LORD” (v. 9), are “righteous” (v. 29), and “wait for the LORD and keep his way” (v. 34).

Far from suggesting excessive submission to others, meekness means submission to God, which gives strength for obedience. Moses is called “more humble [“meek” in some translations] than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). He was not being called a sissy. Nor did the astonishing compassion and dedication of Jesus to his mission suggest someone ready to wilt before a challenge. These virtues he received from God and offered totally to God. That he carried his obedience to the cross for our sake defined the meekness of Jesus as extraordinary courage.

We are now called to receive the mind of Christ and follow him. This is the way of meekness for us. The virtues he lived are ours to imitate.

In blessing the meek, Jesus is lifting up not the acquisitive and well-connected, but the poor, the powerless, and those more often oppressed than successful, who typically wind up on the underside of social respectability. Most of us, myself included, have a hard time accepting this eagerly, and a hard time receiving the gift of the kingdom as really good news, because we are among the privileged. It is hard to seize a disturbing truth when a comfortable life depends on toning it down. Perhaps that is why, as John Haughey has observed, “We read the Gospel as if we had no money, and we spend our money as if we know nothing of the Gospel.”³

The socially and economically disenfranchised have less about which to feel self-sufficient and seem more eager to welcome the good news that God wants us to enter the kingdom. It is no coincidence, then, that the poorest fifth of the U.S. population consistently gives a higher proportion of income to charitable causes than do middle- and upper-income groupings. Most of us are poor in generosity rather than in spirit, for to recognize our spiritual poverty and the riches of God’s grace leads to generosity. What would happen if we *really* became meek? What if we showed extravagant generosity with God’s gifts to us? How much more empow-

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ered our lives and the mission of the church would be. And how much less suffering the world would have. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:34). By that standard, mammon appears to have a clear edge. We are not so meek after all.

The examples of Jesus and Moses teach us that to be meek is not to be shorn of ambition, but to have one's ambition transformed from self-serving purposes to that of serving God. Much has been made recently of an obscure prayer of a man named Jabez who asked the Lord to "bless me and enlarge my territory" (1 Chronicles 4:10), a prayer that is being held up as a model for Christians.⁴ If the intent is truly to ask God to enlarge opportunities for love and service, such a prayer is to be fervently offered, for that is ambition transformed. But if, set in our mammon-driven culture, the focus is on *me* and *my* territory, and the underlying intent is to use God to gain more for myself, it is an exercise in self-deception and in capitulation to urges that are anything but meek. "It is a scandal and a sin to ask God for more when we are not being faithful with what we have," writes Peter Larson.⁵ The model prayer for meekness and other virtues of the kingdom remains the Lord's Prayer.

"The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). Those who acknowledge this by placing their hope in God and offering what they are and what they have to him and to his children in need—those are the meek. To them the promise is given—inherit the earth.

INHERIT THE KINGDOM

If Jesus tells the meek that the earth will belong to them, why did he say, as also recorded in the Sermon on the Mount, *not* to gather earthly treasures? "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21).

These words bring us back to the paradox that we find life by giving it to Christ. To inherit the earth, we must let go of the earth. To obtain the earth, we must give earthly treasures away and place our heart elsewhere.

There are two sides to this paradox. The first is that letting go of the earth is to acknowledge that the earth belongs to the Lord. In that recognition comes the realization that the earth, all of it, is a gift for us to treasure, care for, and enjoy. The person who is preoccupied with mammon focuses on microscopic bits of the earth: a piece of property, a position, a bank account, a house, a closet full of clothes. Even the richest of the rich, or the most powerful of the powerful, garner a pathetically small fraction of the earth. They can become so engrossed in possessing what they call "mine" that they lose sight of the fact that they are stewards, not owners. They then mistake their identity, forgetting that they were made in the image

of God and therefore also belong to God. (Caesar's image is on the coin, so Caesar gets his tax—but God gets what is stamped with God's image.)

Rich or poor, being captive to mammon means failing to see the earth as God's gift. A person may smile smugly and say, "The world is my oyster," but what he or she really means is, "Look at this tiny speck of earth that I have succeeded in making my own!" Such an appreciation of the earth turns a person toward self rather than toward God, robbing one of gratitude and joy.

The second side of the paradox is that the things of the earth will not last. Its treasures are subject to decay and to theft. Rich people, too, will decay—but this they forget in their preoccupation with mammon. Therefore, the only lasting treasures (whether money, time, ability, or influence) are those invested in heaven—that is to say, those given to help others, those put in service for the needy, those shared with the poor, those furthering the mission of the church, those protecting the earth for future generations. These, offered to God, have transcendent value. First John tells us not to love the world of sinful craving and pride: "The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever" (2:17). In a similar vein, the letter of James tells us, "Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—because they will pass away like a wild flower" (1:9-10).

We inherit the earth by seeing it with the eyes of faith. Because we are part of God's new creation in Christ, we can perceive the world as it really is, and as it one day will be when, in the resurrection, the reign of God is fully revealed.

When the heart is given to God, mammon becomes a servant. We can then place it among other things to be enjoyed and used in a way that honors the God to whom everything belongs. And God, in turn, honors us not simply with the earth, but with the kingdom as our inheritance. A house, a bed, a family meal, friendships, work, prayer, pleasure, income, citizenship—these and all other things are changed, their value dramatically enhanced because they are accepted as treasures to enjoy and employ for the highest of purposes.

The God who richly loves us and has made this so evident in Christ opens his heart and wants to give us more than we can possibly fathom. We instinctively reach for something ridiculously small, but God says, "Inherit the earth." We may wish for passing advantages, but God says, "Inherit the kingdom." They are not different promises, but one and the same. Why should we ever wish for something so insignificant and transient as wealth or fame when God offers us the kingdom as an inheritance? And to celebrate the kingdom, why would we not gladly die to our privileges so that others may live?

The Roman conquerors, and all conquerors before and after them, fought, suffered, and risked death for the sake of treasure and a taste of fleeting glory. But in Christ, we have a glory from God that is lasting, and one that is incomparably superior. The brief reach of the Romans for glory prompted them to great sacrifice. They did it for a culture of death. We do it for life—for a crown that lasts forever.⁶

NOTES

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2 Cited by Frank E. Gaebel, "Old Testament Foundations for Living More Simply," *Living More Simply*, Ronald J. Sider, ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 27.

3 John Haughey, *Virtue and Affluence: The Challenge of Wealth* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997), cited by Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington: Church of the Saviour, 2001), 5.

4 Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2000).

5 Peter Larson, "Who Needs Jesus When You've Got Jabez?" *Prism*, Sept/Oct 2001, 28.

6 This article is reprinted from Arthur Simon, *How Much is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture* (Baker Book House, 2003), 175-182. Used by permission of DIVISION, a division of Baker Book House Company, copyright © 2003. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company.



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