

On The Way

The Beatitudes: Blessed are the meek...

Would you be flattered if someone described you as “meek”? Would you take it as a compliment? No, probably not. “Meek” has negative connotations in our culture. It smacks of being a wimp or a pushover. Heck, it even rhymes with *weak*. No, most of us would recoil at this description. And yet our Lord exhorts us to just this quality: *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*. Is this a recipe for wimpy Christians? Are we to embrace weakness?

We should keep in mind that, when inviting us to imitate him, our Lord points to his own meekness: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am *meek* and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves” (Mt 11:29). When he enters Jerusalem, he doesn’t do so as a conqueror but in fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy: “Behold, your king comes to you, *meek* and riding on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden” (cf. Mt 21:5). He is indeed meek, but clearly not wimpy and not a doormat. He is King.

In fact, the Gospel’s word for meek (*praus*) indicates not weakness at all but the strength of will that enables a person to deal gently with others. After all, it takes nothing to run roughshod over others. Belligerence is for the weak; bullies are insecure people. It takes strength of character to deal firmly but gently with people.

Meekness, the third of the “detachment” beatitudes, deepens poverty of spirit. It pries us away from our attachment to the aggressive instinct to dominate and seize power. It is the dethronement of our self-authority, of the “autonomous self.” It is *self-mastery* rather than mastery of others.

Perhaps the distinction between “power” and “authority” can help us understand this better. Power is simply force, the ability to impose one’s will on another. It can sometimes be at the service of the good. For example, when a police officer overpowers a criminal to protect society. But we know how easily power is abused.

Authority, on the other hand, is the capacity to influence and move people by strength of character. The word “authority” comes from the Latin *to augment or enlarge*. The one entrusted with authority is concerned with the growth of others, not their domination. Thus, when the Gospels say that Jesus taught the crowds “as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Mt 7:29) it is an acknowledgment of his meekness. He had no office or position of power. But his meekness – that strength of character that moved people – spoke volumes. We’ve seen this in our own day: Mother Teresa had no power, but she had tremendous authority.

Our culture speaks about “empowerment,” by which is usually meant gaining access to the “levers of power.” Followers of Christ, however, are interested not in grabbing their own share of the power pie, but in surrendering to the Lord and thus attaining true moral authority.

Saint Augustine associates meekness with the Holy Spirit’s Gift of *piety*, which is both the supernatural confidence of the Father’s love as well as the care of those in need. When we’re confident of being God’s children, then we have nothing to prove, and we can deal more gently with others. The more we know that the Father has *entrusted* authority to us, the more gently we will use it.