

## Exegesis of the Gospel of Matthew

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Matthew 5:6; Gregory of Nyssa's sermon

### Key Question:

Why does Jesus make "meekness" the condition for "inheriting the land"? What is "meekness" and how is it related?

### Greek-English Lexicons:

- Danker-Bauer (second edition, 1979) says of "meek" (πραῦς): "Pertaining to not being overly impressed by a sense of one's self-importance; gentle; humble; considerate. Meek in the older favorable sense describes the ruler of Syracuse as one who is meek to his citizens, apparently the rank and file, unassuming."
- Thayer-Smith says, "Wycliff has it 'Blessed be mild men.' The ancients used the word for outward conduct and towards men. They did not rank it as a virtue anyhow. It was a mild equanimity that was sometimes negative and sometimes positively kind. But Jesus lifted the word to a nobility never attained before. In fact, the Beatitudes assume a new heart, for the natural man does not find in happiness the qualities mentioned here by Christ. The English word "meek" has largely lost the fine blend of spiritual poise and strength meant by the Master. He calls himself "meek and lowly in heart" ( Matthew 11:29 ) and Moses is also called meek. It is the gentleness of strength, not mere effeminacy. By "the earth" ( τὴν γῆν ) Jesus seems to mean the Land of Promise ( Psalms 37:11 ) though Bruce thinks that it is the whole earth. Can it be the solid earth as opposed to the sea or the air?"

### Concordance to Find Other Biblical Usage:

*Gospel of Matthew:* Matthew uses this term in two other places.

- In Mt.11:29, Jesus says, "Learn from me, for I am πραῦς and humble of heart."
- In Mt.21:5, Matthew associates Jesus' entry into Jerusalem with the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9, "Behold your King is coming to you, πραῦς and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden." For Jesus to use it to describe himself is helpful exegetically. It roots πραῦς in Jesus' own character and life with the Father, as well as his relationships with others.
- Note: Matthew is unique among the Gospel writers for his use of this term.

*New Testament:*

- In 1 Peter 3:4, Peter says, "with the imperishable quality of a πραῦς and quiet spirit." It is clearly a character quality and a relational posture, as Peter expects Christian wives to express it even towards non-Christian husbands.

*Old Testament:*

Three Old Testament references seem especially significant:

- Numbers 12:3 says, "Now the man Moses was very humble [LXX translation uses the term πραῦς], more than any man who was on the face of the earth."
  - This is an odd statement, especially if we assume that Moses was the author / composer of the material in the book of Numbers and the whole Pentateuch (Genesis – Deuteronomy).
  - However, in context of Numbers, it is a good illustration of Moses' leadership. He was not quick to retaliate against those who challenged his leadership or complained about his decisions. The context of Numbers 12:3 demonstrates that Moses did not defend himself against uprisings, challenges, and complaints. Even when his sister Miriam criticized him for marrying a Cushite woman (Num.12:1 – 2), Moses did not defend himself; he let God answer Miriam. He allowed God to judge Miriam – He turned her into a leper for a time.
  - Matthew portrays Jesus as retelling the story of Israel. He does seem to allude to episodes in Moses' life and leadership. It makes sense that Matthew would describe Jesus' teaching on meekness, and Jesus' self-description as meek (Mt.11:29; Mt.21:5). If Moses was meek in his leadership, Jesus was meek as well.

- Psalm 37 reminds Israel to “trust in the Lord and do good, dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness” (37:3) and then repeats the refrain with some helpful variation:
  - those who wait for the Lord, they will inherit the land (37:9)
  - the humble (LXX: οἱ πραεῖς) will inherit the land (37:11)
  - those blessed by Him will inherit the land (37:22)
  - the righteous will inherit the land (37:29)
  - wait for the Lord and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land (37:34)

In the context of Israel’s history and piety, the Psalm identifies faithfulness to God’s commandments as the primary characteristic God looks for in helping Israel to inherit the promised land. The Psalm opposes being jealous of the wicked, even if the wicked seem to accumulate more wealth in the short run (37:7). The Psalm also opposes the use of the sword and bow by the wicked (37:14 - 15), which might have bearing on how Israel looked at their non-Israelite neighbors, too. Although God raised up judges and temporary armies to defend Israel, as the Book of Judges narrates, the Psalm does not seem to advocate the use of sword and bow as the primary response to the wicked, whoever they may be. “Meekness” as a term therefore takes its meaning from this posture. The book of Chronicles gives multiple illustrations of this principle.

- Isaiah 57:12 - 21 collects and connects almost all the phrases of Jesus’ beatitudes in a dense poetic section. Isaiah’s usage strongly suggests that the beatitude qualities Jesus names were already seen as a total portrait of a person or persons, both by him and by his hearers (and Matthew’s readers). The eight beatitudes were not describing eight individuals, but rather one person or people.

12 “I will declare your righteousness and your deeds,  
But they will not profit you.  
13 “When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you.  
But the wind will carry all of them up,  
And a breath will take them away.  
But he who takes refuge in Me will inherit the land  
And will possess My holy mountain.”  
14 And it will be said,  
“Build up, build up, prepare the way,  
Remove every obstacle out of the way of My people.”  
15 For thus says the high and exalted One  
Who lives forever, whose name is Holy,  
“I dwell on a high and holy place,  
And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit  
In order to revive the spirit of the lowly  
And to revive the heart of the contrite.  
16 “For I will not contend forever,  
Nor will I always be angry;  
For the spirit would grow faint before Me,  
And the breath of those whom I have made.  
17 “Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain [opposite of mercy] I was angry and struck him;  
I hid My face and was angry,  
And he went on turning away, in the way of his heart.  
18 “I have seen his ways, but I will heal him;  
I will lead him and restore comfort to him and to his mourners,  
19 Creating the praise of the lips.  
Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near,”  
Says the Lord, “and I will heal him.”  
20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea,  
For it cannot be quiet,  
And its waters toss up refuse and mud.  
21 “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

### **Matthew 5:6 in the Context of Matthew 5:1 – 12**

The eight beatitudes indicate a sequence, or a process, of spiritual growth. I think the first two beatitudes refer to a humble assessment of one's self as in desperate need of God ("poor in spirit"), and contrition and sorrow for sin ("mourn"). The third and fourth beatitudes need to be interpreted together as well.

"Meekness" must stand in relation to "hungering and thirsting for righteousness." Here, Psalm 37 and Isaiah 57 are helpful. Meekness means a zeal to be faithful to God's commandments, but not taking up arms or a hostile posture towards others who are not as faithful, or, who might even be considered wicked. Danker-Bauer's and Thayer-Smith's definitions relate "meekness" both towards one's self and others. Towards myself I am not to be "self-important." Towards others, I am to be "gentle, humble, considerate, unassuming." This is consistent with both Old Testament piety and the New Testament teaching and example of Jesus. Ultimately, Jesus himself is the example of "meekness." Although Jesus was clearly aware of his role and vocation as Messiah, he seemed reserved at disclosing what we would now call his pre-existence as the eternal Word-Son of God. This is certainly true in the Synoptics' telling of Jesus' ministry, but also in John's telling. At the same time, Jesus was gentle, humble, and considerate towards other people. His rejection of the militarist-zealot option and vision for both Messiah and Israel meant that he served Israel as a different kind of king than the one they expected.

This posture is connected to "inheriting the land" because of past precedent and future promises from God. Past precedent with Mosaic Israel indicates that God protected Israel when they were obedient, often through unusual or supernatural means. God caused them to inherit the garden land when they listened to Him. At times, this did take the form of military defense or warfare, but at most times it did not, and in any case God expected partnership-obedience and faithfulness from His people at all times. The future promise from God involves "the new heaven and new earth." Gregory of Nyssa takes Jesus' reference to land or "earth" as a contrast to "heaven," but it need not be a contrast but a reunion. We will inherit the renewed heaven and earth which are reunited together, sundered as they were by the fall of Adam and Eve, which caused God to withdraw the garden for a time for our own protection, that we might not immortalize evil within ourselves by eating from the tree of life while in a corrupted state. Now that God in Christ has healed the corruption within human nature, in such a way that we can inherit and participate in his healed human nature by his Spirit, God can now reunite heaven and earth in a renewed mode for His children.