

Meekness *in the* Crucible



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Exod. 32:1–14, Ps. 62:1–8, Ezek. 24:15–27, Matt. 5:43–48, 1 Pet. 2:18–25.*

Memory Text: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (*Matthew 5:5, NIV*).

We don’t hear the word *meek* used much, except maybe when reading about Moses or studying the Beatitudes. It’s hard to figure out why, either. Meekness is defined as “enduring injury with patience and without resentment.” No wonder we don’t hear much about it; it’s hardly a trait well respected in culture today. Sometimes the Bible translates this word as “humble.” Again, humility isn’t a character trait seen as desirable by most cultures, either.

But meekness, enduring injury with patience and without resentment, is one of the most powerful characteristics of Jesus and His followers. And yet, it’s not an end in itself: Meekness of spirit can be a powerful weapon in the hands of those who are in the midst of pain and suffering. Indeed, the crucible is a great place to learn meekness of heart, for through our own meekness and broken places we can be powerful witnesses for God.

The Week at a Glance: What is the relationship between suffering and meekness? How can we, in our own meekness and broken places, be a witness to others? How can meekness really be a strength, not a weakness, for the Christian?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 8.*

Broken Bread and Poured-Out Wine

Oswald Chambers has said that we are to become “broken bread and poured-out wine” for others. What do you think he means by this?

All through the Bible there are examples of people being “broken” to serve others. Moses was called to endure unending waves of gossip and criticism as he led people to the Promised Land. Joseph was called to a journey that involved betrayal and imprisonment as he was brought to a position of service in Egypt. In each case, God permitted the situations in order that His people’s lives could become theaters of His grace and care, not only for themselves but for the good of others, as well. God may use us in the same way. It is easy to feel angry or hurt in such situations. But as we noted yesterday, meekness is the God-given ability to endure such things “with patience and without resentment.”

Read Ezekiel 24:15–27. What’s happening here? Why was Ezekiel put through this crucible?

In verse 24 God says, “ ‘Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord’ ” (NIV). Through Ezekiel’s example the people of Israel were going to be convicted of the truth about who God was, the Sovereign Lord—as they experienced the fulfillment of the prophecy that Ezekiel’s life was symbolizing. But they would see this only because Ezekiel became broken in the fingers of God—for them. Who knows how many people will see “the Sovereign Lord” through us in our own broken places, as well?

Sooner or later life itself breaks us all. What has been your experience with being broken? What lessons have you learned? How can your own broken soul be used by the Lord to help other people?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

▶ **Key Text:** *1 Peter 4:12, 13*

▶ **Teach the Class to:**

Know: Meekness, or patience in the face of injury, is necessary in the Christian life.

Feel: A willingness to love our enemies in the sense that we can see them through God's eyes.

Do: Allow God to take control of our reactions in instances in which we face injustice or mistreatment.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Meekness (*Matt. 5:5*)

A Most religions or spiritual traditions embrace some form of meekness as a quality to be desired. Why then is it disdained in the real life of most societies?

B How does meekness make us better able to witness for God?

C Meekness usually is thought of as a New Testament virtue; can you think of instances in the Old Testament that teach the value of meekness?

II. Loving Our Enemies (*Matt. 5:43–48*)

A How does Jesus' example help us in the difficult task of loving our enemies?

B Why is loving our enemies in the biblical sense different from merely excusing unjustifiable actions, or being a doormat? Is it different?

C How can God help us to learn how genuinely to love our enemies?

III. A Closed Mouth (*Matt. 11:29*)

A Are there ever situations during which we should speak out against injustice? If so, how can we keep it from becoming hate for the person committing the injustice?

B Is meekness in the face of injury and injustice synonymous with inaction? Keep in mind that some among us may take seriously this position.

C Have you personally suffered injustice? How did you react? What were the results?

▶ **Summary:** While meekness and humility may appear to be weak by worldly standards, Jesus valued them enough that He promised that the meek would inherit the earth.

Interceding for Grace

Read Exodus 32:1–14. What role do we find Moses playing here?

After the people began worshiping the golden calf, God decided they had gone too far and announced that He would destroy the people and make Moses a great nation. But rather than taking up God's offer, Moses pleaded for God to show grace to His people, and God relented.

Exodus 32:1–14 raises two important issues. First, God's offer to destroy the rebellious people and bless Moses was a test for him. God wanted Moses to demonstrate just how much compassion he felt for these desperately disobedient people. And Moses passed. Like Jesus, he pleaded for mercy for sinners. This reveals something very interesting: Sometimes God may also allow us to face opposition, He might allow us to be in a crucible so that He, we, and the watching universe can see how much compassion we have for those who are wayward.

What reasons did Moses give for asking the Lord not to destroy Israel?

Second, this passage shows that opposition and disobedience are calls to reveal grace. Grace is needed when people least deserve it. But when they least deserve it is also the time that we feel the least like offering it. But when Moses' sister, Miriam, was criticizing him, he cried out to the Lord to heal her from leprosy (*Numbers 12*). When God was angry with Korah and his followers and threatened to destroy them all, Moses fell on his face to plead for their lives. The next day, when Israel grumbled against Moses for the death of the rebels and God threatened to destroy them all again, Moses fell facedown and urged Aaron quickly to make atonement for them all (*Numbers 16*). In his own meekness, in his own selflessness in the midst of this crucible, Moses sought grace on behalf of those who certainly didn't deserve it.

Think about the people around you who you think are the least deserving of grace. How can you, with meekness and selfless humility, be a revelation of God's grace to them?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer the question, *Why is this lesson important to me?*

Don't take it for granted that your class members understand biblical meekness. While people know meekness as a biblical concept, very few understand what it means or, for that matter, aspire to be meek. People may think of meekness (or its synonym, humility) as weakness, being a doormat to others, a mousy timidity, ignorance, having no opinions of one's own, or a lack of ambition. Why would anyone want to adopt those qualities?

Consider, However, a Few of the Humble People of Scripture:

- Moses: Numbers 12:3
- Hezekiah: 2 Chronicles 32:26
- Jesus: Matthew 11:29
- Paul: Acts 20:19

While these are said to be humble before God, none of them were weak. Rather, an intentionally cultivated humility was part of their survival strategy for hard times. It helped them to trust God and to avoid resentment.

This quarter's lessons suggest ways of surviving difficult times by adopting attitudes that may be counterintuitive to modern coping strategies. In a world in which success is sometimes synonymous with trampling on others, few other demonstrations of power are so distinctly Christian as humility.

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question, *What do I need to know from God's Word?*

Bible Commentary

I. Broken Bread and Poured-Out Wine

(Review the main points of Ezekiel 24:15–24.)

This is a troubling story. But discussing why (or whether) God killed

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Loving Those Who Hurt Us

Someone once said: “Loving our enemies, then, does not mean that we are supposed to love the dirt in which the pearl is buried; rather it means that we love the pearl which lies in the dust. . . . God does not love us because we are by nature lovable. But we become lovable because He loves us.”

When you look at your “enemies,” what do you normally see—the pearl or the dirt around it?

Read Matthew 5:43–48. Jesus calls us to love and pray for our enemies. What example from nature does Jesus give us there that helps us understand why we should love our enemies? What’s the point He is teaching us?

In verse 45, Jesus uses the example of His Father in heaven to illustrate how we should treat those who hurt us, who perhaps put us in the worst kind of crucibles. Jesus says that His Father sends the blessing of rain to both the righteous and the unrighteous; if God gives even the unjust rain, how then should we treat them, as well?

Jesus isn’t trying to say that we should always have a warm, fuzzy feeling to everyone who causes us trouble, though this may also be possible. Fundamentally, love for our enemies is not meant to be a feeling we have for them but specific actions toward them that reveal care and consideration.

Jesus concludes this passage with a verse that often causes a lot of debate: “ ‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ ” (*vs. 48, NIV*). But the meaning is very clear in the context: Those people who want to be perfect as God is perfect must show love to their enemies as God shows love to His. To be perfect in God’s sight is to love the opposition; and to do this takes a meekness of heart that only God can give.

Keeping in mind our definition of meekness (“enduring injury with patience and without resentment”), list the changes you must make in order to allow the Lord to give you the kind of meekness of heart that will help you have the right attitude toward “enemies.”

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Ezekiel's wife will yield less to the lesson's point than God's purpose as stated in verse 24: that Ezekiel's humble reaction to the misfortune is to be an object lesson to clarify Israel's understanding of God.

Consider This: Has observing someone's reaction to misfortune ever helped your understanding of God?

II. Interceding for Grace

intercession against God's wrath over the golden calf incident displays a boldness bordering on impudence.

Almost impertinent is his warning God (as if God doesn't know) of the damage that His anger will do to His reputation: After all the effort of bringing Israel out of Egypt, says Moses, His rage now would suggest to the Egyptians that Israel's being rescued was a bad idea from the start. Moses finishes with bold demands: Stop being angry, change Your mind, and remember Your promises.

Consider This: How demanding do we have the right to be when interceding with God?

III. Loving Those Who Hurt Us

(Read Matthew 5:43, 44.)

"In its absoluteness and concreteness, it is without parallel in paganism or Judaism. The command should not be understood abstractly, 'love all people, including even enemies.' In Jesus' situation it referred particularly to the occupying Roman forces, and thus to national enemies as well as to competing religious groups and personal enemies."—*The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VIII (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 195.

Consider This: Is it possible to love an especially hateful enemy—such as a terrorist? How would such love be manifested?

IV. A Closed Mouth

(Read 1 Peter 2:18–25.)

This passage has been controversial because it appears to recommend passivity in the face of societal oppression. During the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionist movement, pro-slavery advocates cited it

A Closed Mouth

The most powerful examples of meekness in the crucible come from Jesus. When He said to come and “learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart” (*Matt. 11:29, NKJV*), He meant it in ways we probably can’t imagine.

Read 1 Peter 2:18–25. Peter is offering some surprising advice to slaves. He describes how Jesus responded to unjust and painful treatment and suggests to them that He has left them “an example, that you should follow His steps” (*1 Pet. 2:21, NKJV*). What principles of meekness and humility in the crucible can we learn from Jesus’ example, as expressed here by Peter?

It is terrible to watch someone else unjustly treat another. And it is extremely painful when we are at the receiving end of such treatment. Because we normally have a strong sense of justice, when injustice occurs our instincts are to “put things right” while carrying what we believe to be a righteous and just anger.

It is not easy to live like this. It is perhaps impossible unless we embrace one critical truth—that in all unjust situations, we must believe that our Father in heaven is in control and that He will act on our behalf when it is according to His will. This also means that we must be open to the possibility that like Jesus, we may not always be saved from injustice. But we must always remember that our Father in heaven is still with us and in charge.

Peter’s advice, modeled from Jesus’ life, is surprising because it seems to be that silence in the face of unjust suffering is a greater witness to the glory of God than “putting people right.” When questioned by Caiaphas and Pilate, Jesus could have said a lot of things to correct the situation and to justify Himself, but He didn’t. His silence was a testimony to His meekness.

How do you deal with situations in which you have been treated unfairly? How can you better apply some of the principles looked at here today to your own life?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

as proof that Holy Writ supported them. It troubles human rights activists when it is used to suggest that the oppressed ought not object to social or economic tyranny.

Of course, these interpretations miss the point. Peter wasn't advocating slavery but addressing how one can survive it spiritually when there's no other choice.

Consider This: In light of Peter's prescription that slaves meekly should accept their lot, how do Christians defend taking stands in favor of human freedom and dignity?

V. Our Rock and Refuge

(Read Psalm 62:1–8.)

The theme of isolation of enemies by God's strength is apparent even in the organization of the psalm: The danger David faces from treacherous people (*vss. 3–5*) is preceded (*vss. 1, 2*) and followed (*vss. 6–8*) by the assurance that God surrounds and protects His own. Metaphorically, then, the enemies' evil intentions are bracketed by, and neutralized by, God's power as those who trust Him are surrounded and strengthened by it.

► STEP 3—Practice!

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Class Activity:

As you share each of the following seven quotations on humility, ask the class what the author meant in each case and what it adds to our understanding of humility.

- 1 "Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues; hence, in the soul in which this virtue does not exist there cannot be any other virtue except in mere appearance."—Augustine of Hippo, early Christian theologian [<http://www.Thinkexist.com>].
- 2 "Humility is like underwear, essential, but indecent if it shows."—Helen Nielsen, novelist [<http://www.Thinkexist.com>].
- 3 "Humility is to make a right estimate of one's self."—Charles H. Spurgeon, English preacher [<http://www.Thinkexist.com>].

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Our Rock and Refuge

So often the most proud people, the most arrogant and pushy, are those who suffer from low self-esteem. Their arrogance and pride—and total lack of meekness or humility—exist as a cover, perhaps even unconsciously, for something lacking inside. What they need is something we all need: a sense of security, of worthiness, of acceptance, especially in times of distress and suffering. We can find that only through the Lord. In short, meekness and humility, far from being attributes of weakness, are often the most powerful manifestation of a soul firmly grounded on the Rock.

Read Psalm 62:1–8. What seems to be the background for this psalm? What points is David making? What spiritual principles can you learn from what he is saying? Most important, how can you learn to apply these principles to your own life?

“Without cause men will become our enemies. The motives of the people of God will be misinterpreted, not only by the world, but by their own brethren. The Lord’s servants will be put in hard places. A mountain will be made of a molehill to justify men in pursuing a selfish, unrighteous course. . . . By misrepresentation these men will be clothed in the dark vestments of dishonesty because circumstances beyond their control made their work perplexing. They will be pointed to as men that cannot be trusted. And this will be done by the members of the church. God’s servants must arm themselves with the mind of Christ. They must not expect to escape insult and misjudgment. They will be called enthusiasts and fanatics. But let them not become discouraged. God’s hands are on the wheel of His providence, guiding His work to the glory of His name.”—Ellen G. White, in *Spalding and Magan Collection*, p. 370.

How immune are you to the reproaches and barbs of others? Mostly likely not that immune, right? What can you do to better cleave to the Lord, to better anchor your sense of self-worth on the One who loves you so much that He died for your sins and thus help protect yourself against the slights of others?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

4 “Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real.”—Thomas Merton, American spiritual writer [<http://www.Thinkexist.com>].

5 “Pride slays thanksgiving, but an humble mind is the soil out of which thanks naturally grow. A proud man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves.”—Henry Ward Beecher, American preacher [<http://www.Thinkexist.com>].

6 “The churches must learn humility as well as teach it.”—George Bernard Shaw, British playwright [<http://www.Thinkexist.com>].

7 Humility is a self-assessment that comes from seeing yourself as God sees you rather than as the world sees you.

Consider This: We think of humility as the antidote to too much pride. In light of quotation 7, might biblical humility also have an effect on a person who feels inferior to others?

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question, *With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?*

Meekness is one of the hardest virtues to teach. American journalist Mignon McLaughlin joked, “The proud man can learn humility, but he will be proud of it.” It is a virtue taught better by example than by precept. That’s why we rely on people such as Jesus, Moses, Paul, and others (both in Scripture and outside of it) to demonstrate for us lives in which power and confidence are not incompatible with meekness.

The difficulty in making application of this lesson will be to help your class understand that genuine humility is a strength, not a weakness. The key is to show humility as a function not primarily of one’s attitude toward other people (that is, acting humble toward others, when you really may not feel it) but of one’s attitude toward God. Humility begins with a resignation to heaven’s will and intentions that, in turn, creates the right attitude toward earthly people and problems.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Seeking True Knowledge,” pp. 453, 454, in *The Ministry of Healing*; “The Sermon on the Mount,” pp. 298–314, in *The Desire of Ages*; “The Worker and His Qualifications,” p. 630, in *Evangelism*.

“The difficulties we have to encounter may be very much lessened by that meekness which hides itself in Christ. If we possess the humility of our Master, we shall rise above the slights, the rebuffs, the annoyances, to which we are daily exposed, and they will cease to cast a gloom over the spirit. The highest evidence of nobility in a Christian is self-control. He who under abuse or cruelty fails to maintain a calm and trustful spirit robs God of His right to reveal in him His own perfection of character. Lowliness of heart is the strength that gives victory to the followers of Christ; it is the token of their connection with the courts above.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 301.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How does humility allow us to “rise above” hurts and annoyances? What do you think is the most important characteristic of humility that allows us to do this?
- ❷ In your own particular culture, how are the characteristics of humility and meekness viewed? Are they respected, despised, or what? What kind of pressures do you face in your culture that work against your cultivating these characteristics?
- ❸ Are there any great examples of meekness and humility from people alive today? If so, who are they, how have they expressed these traits, and what can you learn from them?
- ❹ Why is it that we so often equate meekness and humility with weakness?
- ❺ We saw how David sought the Lord as a refuge. But how does that work, how is that refuge always manifested? In other words, how can we, as a church, be a refuge for those who need a refuge? What kind of refuge does your own local church provide? What can you do to help make it a place of refuge for those who need it?