

The Fruit of Meekness

“Wherefore laying aside all defilement and excessive badness, receive with meekness [openness] the implanted Word which is able to save your souls” (James 1:21).

The word “meekness” has, in the English language a negative flavor. It connotes a rather weak-willed person who is easily imposed upon. Even though it may also contain the idea of mildness and gentleness, it is normally not used in a complimentary way. The meek person is seen as one who accepts things as they are, not as a matter of principle, but weakness of will. Thus we see meekness as weakness or lack of conviction.

The Greek word for meekness—*prautes*—has nothing in it of this negative and weak implication. It is in fact quite a strong word meaning “openness to God and man.” As such, it implies a determined effort toward a conciliatory attitude. Applied to human relationships it involves tolerance and flexibility. In the relationship to God it implies a readiness to accept His Word and His will. That is how James uses it in the above text.

The usage of the word in the Greek classics gives us a strong clue to its basic meaning. We find examples of it in the works of Herodotus and Xenophon. Herodotus was a Greek historian (5th century, B.C.) who writes of the conflict between the Persians and the Greeks. In Book II of his four volume work, he records an incident in which one King Amasis is angry with his wife Ladice. She denied the matter that had caused the anger, but was unable to pacify him. She then made a vow to the goddess Aphrodite. The important line is as follows: “So, the king’s anger not abating for all of her denial, Ladice made a vow in her heart . . .” (II. 181). The word “abating” is from the Greek word we are looking at—*prautes*. The king was not open to her or conciliatory.

Another instructive usage of the word is found in Xenophon, in his famous work—The Anabasis, which chronicles a long march by the Greeks up into Persia (Anabasis means “going up”). In a particular incident recorded by Xenophon, a quarrel breaks out between two soldiers. The incident threatened a much wider conflict so one Proxenus sought to defuse the explosive situation by minimizing the importance of the grievance and thus opening the way for a more conciliatory attitude. The Greek word used is from our word *prautes*, and quite clearly describes the spirit and manner in which Proxenus spoke. The force of the word indicates that he spoke in a way that would encourage a more moderate attitude on the part of the soldiers toward each other (Anabasis, II. v. 14).

So in the Greek classics, the word is seen primarily as a purposeful effort to bring about conciliation by tempering one’s position and attitude. Thus, in Xenophon, Proxenus sought to defuse an explosive situation by speaking of it in a moderate or tempered way. In Herodotus, king Amasis was not tempered or open to his wife, thus forcing her to resort (as the story goes) to an appeal or vow to the goddess Aphrodite.

In the New Testament the word undergoes an enrichment (as is the case with many such words in the Greek classics). It defines an attitude of mind or spirit

that relates to God and others with an openness born of grace and is expressed in the humble attitude of recognizing the rights and needs of others as well as the sovereign claims of God. Thus, in the cover text, the believers are urged to restore (mend, recover) those who are “caught” in a trespass or offense, in a spirit of openness or tolerance. This of course presupposes that the offending party has shown an attitude of penitence. This would reflect the true spirit of compassion with which Jesus regarded the “sheep” of Israel (Matthew 9:36). The church, as well as the world, is full of merciless leaders, who, like the Pharisees of old, are more concerned about the propagation of their own ill conceived ideologies than they are about caring for the sheep. The harsh and judgmental attitude toward human frailty is not a mark of the Spirit-directed ministry, but is common to a large number of religions and sects that have little to do with Christ. It is not disciplined conduct that separates the child of God from the child of Satan. Many fanatic religious groups, whose murderous and outrageous behavior seems to have been spawned in the pit of hell, yet show a dedication and discipline far beyond most Christians. It is rather the caring about Christ and the consequent flow of compassion that marks the difference. Any zealot, godly or ungodly, can lay down his life for the cause. So the spirit of openness and tolerance is a more reliable indicator of the presence of the Holy Spirit than disciplined conduct which can easily be practiced in the flesh even by the Godless.

Jesus uses the term (*praus*) concerning Himself. “*Take my yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and My burden is light*” (Matthew 11:29,30). Again, when He made His so-called “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem, He quoted the prophesy concerning Himself—“*Tell ye the daughter of Zion, behold thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass and the colt, the foal of an ass*” (Matthew 21:5). Jesus was certainly not meek in any negative sense. He submitted Himself unconditionally unto God and to His earthly office, but He did so with strength of will and purpose rather than with docile resignation. He was at all points open to God in the performance of His earthly assignment—“I come to do Thy will O God.”

In the same vein, Moses was said to be “*very meek above all the men which were upon the face of the earth*” (Numbers 12:3). Now to say that he was docile, or even gentle, would be absurd, but he was certainly open to God and performed a pivotal task in the process of redemption that called for an absolute obedience to the most minute detail in the setting forth of the monumental law and the construction of the most sacred and significant center of worship that had ever been erected on the earth.

In the so-called “Beatitudes,” Jesus quotes one of David’s psalms—“*The meek shall inherit the earth*” (37:11). In his psalm, David is contrasting the lot of the wicked with the lot of the meek. The idea of being docile or gentle hardly fits the comparison. It makes much better sense that while the wicked may now prevail over the world, those that are open to God will one day overcome them and inherit the earth. In analyzing chapter 5, we have found that the word “blessed” really means “touched by God.” Jesus is saying that those who are open to God are open because they have been touched by Him, and will one day inherit the earth as David prophesied.

In Matthew 28, Jesus is speaking of the yoke of submission and uses Himself as

an example. But the yoke that He gives leads to rest of soul rather than bondage. He said, “*My yoke is easy [cut to fit] and my burden is light [easy to bear].*” Jesus was the example of the kind of openness to God or submissiveness implied by yielding to God’s yoke.

The Greek classics use the word *prautes* to indicate a conciliatory attitude—not docility (our English word “meekness”), but a determined moderation of attitude to eliminate barriers of hostility or misunderstanding. Jesus uses the word of Himself in terms of an attitude of openness to God and submissiveness to His earthly office as Savior of the world. James uses it in terms of an attitude of openness to receive the Word of God. Paul uses it to encourage openness toward one another in an attitude of grace and tolerance toward human weakness. There is no hint in the word, either in the Greek classics or in the New Testament of the negative sense of docility or lassitude.

In assessing the implications of the concept of the word as a fruit of the Spirit, we must understand that we are not dealing with any kind of human passivity. The word has nothing to do with eliminating emotions. Anger was not an uncommon experience for Jesus or Paul. They were not void of human feelings. James says that Elijah was a man of “like passions as we are.” The presence of the Spirit of Christ does not preclude normal human reactions of distress and indignation. The Christian bleeds like anyone else. The Holy Spirit does not replace the brain with a sort of “computerized equanimity.” Jesus was not just critical of the Pharisees. He was furious and outraged and drove them out of the temple with a scourge of ropes. Moses, the “meekest man on the earth,” was so furious at the children of Israel that he smashed the very tablets of the law that God had given him on Sinai. He did not possess the Holy Spirit in the sense that we do in the New Testament, but he was described as “meek above all men of the earth.” Christians often do outrageous things to one another and yet there are those that feel that if they are angry in the face of such behavior they reflect a lack of the Holy Spirit. That is complete nonsense. The idea that “I can do anything to you that I want, and you have to like me anyway because you are a Christian,” is idiotic. Remember the difference in the Greek text between caring and liking—between concern and affection. If people mistreat us we don’t like them and, in fact, may be quite angry with them, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t care. The word *agape*, which means caring, is the word used for the commandment of love. The word *phile*, which means affection, is never used of the commandment. Feelings cannot be commanded. You can dislike the conduct of someone very much and yet care about their welfare. There is no place in the Word of God for the acceptance of bad behavior on the basis of some kind of “ethereal docility” mistakenly assumed to be the “love of God.” The wrath of God is a concept that runs from one end of the Bible to the other. Should it be assumed that He is a bad example to His followers? “Oh but you say, that is righteous indignation.” Call it what you like, it certainly does not illustrate any kind of blind passivity in the presence of misconduct.

The presence of the Holy Spirit within us produces an attitude of openness to God and man—the acceptance of the will of God on the earth and the desire for peace and harmony in the body of Christ. The flesh does not always respond adequately to this inner sensitivity, but the fact that it is there indicates that the Spirit of Christ is there. The constant concern of believers seem to be, not, “How can I escape this responsibility,” but, “Why am I not more gracious toward my brother?” That, in itself, is the very indication that the Holy Spirit is within

us, else, we would not care. We will always struggle in the flesh in the carrying out of the desires of our spirits. One has found over a great many years of dealing with the family of God, that there is much anguish among believers over their attitudes toward one another, even though the prevailing patterns of behavior may seem to indicate otherwise. Paul saw his flesh as a dead body clinging to him and longed for deliverance over it, even though his plain teaching indicated that deliverance would only come when we would at last escape the prison house of “this earthly tabernacle.”

Meanwhile, the evidence of the Holy Spirit is exhibited not in flawless behavior, but in the concern for the lack of flawless behavior—the desire to please Christ in spite of human conduct to the contrary, and the spiritual sensitivities which we have toward Christ and others.

Openness to Christ and others is the essential evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

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