

BLESSED ARE YOU

SUMMARY

Many are bitter because of their social situation, which enforces a submission they both resent and resist. Even such bitterness stands under Jesus' promise of happiness; it can be transformed into rejoicing.

BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES

The Book of Ruth

Matthew 5:4, 5; 15:21-28

WORD LIST

Canaanite

gleaning

inheritance

meek

meekness

Moabite

2

THE MOURNERS AND THE MEEK

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*
(MATTHEW 5:4, 5)

A Story from Dachau

Dr. Carol Smith, a retired pediatrician, was a member of the study group in Sante Fe with whom I tested this material. One Sunday morning we had time for a private visit. She told me about her husband, Marcus. As a young army physician he was sent in the spring of 1945 to the infamous labor camp of Dachau. It was not until decades later that he was able to write about the misery of the place. In his book, *The Harrowing of Hell*, he describes how his team of specialists helped over 30,000 foreign laborers prepare to return to their homelands.

If any group of people fit all descriptions of “those who mourn,” and “the meek,” it is those described in Smith’s book. Although the war in Europe had ended, they were not released at once. Immediate repatriation was impossible. Most were physically unfit to travel; transportation was unavailable. For several months they were kept under guard, regimented, documented – with no choice but to submit. Most of them had memories of torture, abuse, and privation. Some had seen loved ones killed. Many had no contact with their families for five years.

The Story of Ruth

For this session we have combined the second and third Beatitudes. It seems that the theme which links these two sayings is “Crying for a Helper,” weeping in despair and pleading for someone to help. Those who thus mourn and are meek are promised comfort and inheritance. As scriptural background for the chapter we will begin with Ruth. While the context of that book differs from the situation of the prisoners at Dachau, there are some similarities. The pivotal character in Ruth is a widow, a refugee, a displaced person. Sorrow, meekness, and inheritance are major themes of her story.

Turn now to the book of **Ruth**. It has only four chapters, and you will be able to grasp the story line quickly. Note especially Ruth's background. She was not a Jew; she was a Moabite. Her in-laws, Elimelech and Naomi, had fled to Moab from famine in their native Bethlehem. Elimelech died. So did Ruth's husband, leaving her childless. Naomi got word that things were better in Bethlehem and determined to go back home. She advised Ruth to stay in her own country, but Ruth in a devoted kind of meekness said to her mother-in-law:

Do not press me to leave you or turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people; and your God my God. (1:16)

When the women arrived in Bethlehem, Naomi took no comfort in being home again:

Call me no longer Naomi (which means Pleasant), call me Mara (which means Bitter), for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. (1:20)

Naomi had cause to be bitter. There was a plot of land that belonged to Elimelech, but as a woman she could not claim it. In Israel's patriarchal culture, women had no inheritance. So the two widows got on as best they could, with Ruth going into the fields to glean. She went where the grain was being reaped; she followed the harvesters, meekly picking up scraps. Her gleanings were what the women had to eat.

The field where Ruth gleaned was owned by Boaz, who happened to be a distant relative of Elimelech. Boaz was impressed by Ruth's modesty and meekness. He told his workers not to molest her, and he gave her extra grain to take home. Naomi quickly saw a way to provide for her daughter-in-law. She told Ruth to go at night to the threshing floor and to lie down at the feet of Boaz. Risking her reputation, perhaps her life, Ruth did as she was told. And Boaz, a gentle man, did not take advantage of Ruth when he awoke. On the contrary, he resolved to marry her.

According to the customs of that day, if Boaz should marry Ruth, he would acquire along with her the right to buy the land that had belonged to Elimelech. But there was a hitch. There was a relative closer to Elimelech than Boaz. However, when that relative saw that he would have to take Ruth along with the land, and thus damage his own inheritance, he forswore any rights. And so Boaz married Ruth and exercised his right to buy the land. Naomi and Ruth were fully integrated into the economy. In time, Ruth bore Boaz a son – whom Naomi claimed also. And this son, Obed, was the grandfather of King David and

one of the forebears of Jesus of Nazareth. And so, in Shakespeare's words: "All losses are restored, and sorrows end."

The Canaanite Woman

For a companion story to Ruth, read **Matthew 15:21-28**. There Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman. When he first meets her she seems anything but meek. He had gone away from Galilee into the neighboring territory of Tyre and Sidon, probably to rest. The woman, a Gentile from that region, came to him and pleaded with him to heal her daughter. The child was demon-possessed.

Jesus tried to put off the anguished mother. He told her that he was sent to the Jews, not to Gentiles. But she would not desist. She got down on her knees and begged for help. Jesus said bluntly, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (15:26) With a terrible meekness she replied, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (15:27) In turn, Jesus showed the meekness of those who are willing to be taught. He answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." (15:28) And it was done. The child was healed.

I have been amazed at how that story resonates with contemporary folk. I once used it as the Bible study for a weekend retreat. When we had our closing worship, members of the congregation were invited to respond publicly and spontaneously to the narrative. A preacher from Puerto Rico praised the courage of the Canaanite woman. In his country, he said, any woman who accosted a man like that in public would be called a prostitute. A divorced woman who had been left to bring up a daughter said with deep emotion, "That's my story." And a college student wept as she identified herself with the daughter; she had been addicted to drugs before faith in Christ set her free.

About Comfort and Inheritance

Surely it is not hard for us to empathize with Ruth, Naomi, and the Canaanite woman. They knew what it was like to be powerless, to live on the margins of their culture. They experienced the bitter tears of despair and cried out for help. Correspondingly, they all received great comfort. But like many women in many cultures, the only way they could get what they needed was through submission. This kind of meekness was their only option.

But what about inheritance? "Blessed are the meek," said Jesus, "for they will inherit the earth." In the story of Ruth we saw how desperately important was the inheritance of the land. If you were cut off from the land, you were cut off from a decent livelihood. You

became a marginal person. To “inherit the earth” was no metaphor for Naomi and Ruth. Unless their family owned land, they were dependent on the charity of others.

The story of the Canaanite woman raises the question of inheritance in a different way. She was, as Jesus rightly perceived, a Gentile who stood outside of the inheritance promised to Israel. When he said to her that it was not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs, he was probably being ironic. Still, the message was plain enough: his mission was to Israel.

In the tradition of the Christian Church, both the Book of Ruth and Matthew 15:21-28 have been understood as missionary stories. Neither Ruth nor the Canaanite woman were born into Israel, and yet the promises of God were extended to include them. These stories tell us that faithfulness, not race or gender, is what finally matters. It is faith alone that assures acceptance into the people of promise; the future belongs to the faithful. Blood, race, inheritance, parentage, gender, social status, ethnic identity do not assure us a place at Jesus’ table. Faith in Christ alone gives access.

It is necessary for congregations to be reminded of that. We tend to shut our doors against folks who are not of “our kind.” People who look different, talk with an accent, or were born in other cultures are not always given full acceptance.

In doing so, we rob ourselves. Even those who seem to offer us nothing but their suffering and misery can be a blessing. For example, some congregations have had wonderful experiences in sponsoring war refugees. Following World War II, the congregation in Chicago where my father-in-law was pastor sponsored a Yugoslavian/German couple. Following the war in southeast Asia, the congregation in Pennsylvania where my mother was an elder sponsored a family from Viet Nam. I am happy to report that both families got along very well and enriched the lives of those congregations.

Not only war refugees know, like Ruth, what it means to labor in fields belonging to others. In Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, the narrator tells us about his grandfather, who had been born in slavery:

On his deathbed he called my father to him and said, “Son, after I’m gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide

open.” They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the meekest of men ... “Learn it to the younguns,” he whispered fiercely; then he died.¹

There are all sorts of persons living among us who have had to use meekness as a strategy to make a place for themselves. Climb your family tree and you will probably find immigrants, slaves, indentured servants, refugees, displaced persons, prisoners of war, poor widows and orphans.

The Infirm Elderly

My dictionary has several definitions of meekness: “enduring injury with patience and without resentment”; “deficient in spirit and courage”; “not violent or strong.” Those phrases bring to mind the elderly in the private nursing home I visited as a young pastor. Many were sunk so deep in grief and dependency that they were almost inert. Their sadness was so palpable that I’d come home from an afternoon at the nursing home with a splitting headache.

Doesn’t your congregation include some of these infirm or invalid elderly? Are not some of them refugees? Is not their hearts’ home a time and place somewhere in the past? A time and place to which there is no hope of return? The present, with its changes in values and technology, seems to many of the elderly like a foreign land. Theirs is an enforced meekness. They have no choice but to be submissive, even though their custodians mean them well and provide food and medicine and blankets.

How can we show to the infirm elderly that we share an inheritance? How can we show them that they have their place among us, that they belong to us and with us in every important way?

FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

Memory Bank

Ruth 1:16

Matthew 5:4, 5

¹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1947), pp. 19-20.

Research

1. If you have a Bible in a language other than English, see how Matthew 5:4-5 is rendered. Make your own translation and compare it with several English versions.
2. Go through the Book of Ruth and underscore the words “bless,” “blessed” and “blessing.” Note the contexts in which these words occur. Who blesses whom? What does the blessing involve?
3. Make a list of words or phrases you associate with meekness. To what extent is submission central to your description? What other qualities are included? How do you relate these qualities to the stories in this chapter?
4. Psalm 137 is a lamentation of Israel during the exile in Babylon. Consider how difficult it must have been to “sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land.” Look for other psalms of lamentation. Are those who mourn promised comfort in these psalms? In what ways?

Reflection

1. Writing in the *Christian Century*, Walter Wink says:

Increasingly women, peasants, gays, minorities, people of color and laborers are becoming aware of the systemic nature of the Powers arrayed against them. Many have tried to oppose their exploiters by means of the very violence used to keep them in check, only to discover that violence, once employed, is not easily renounced ... How can evil be vanquished without our creating new evils and becoming evil ourselves?²

Think about this question in relationship to your understanding of Matthew 5:4-5.

2. In this session the second and third Beatitudes were considered together. What advantages did you find in looking at these sayings at the same time? In what ways do mourning and meekness often go together?
3. In the Book of Ruth an underlying assumption is that marriage and sons are primary sources of a woman’s security and value. What is your evaluation of this assumption? What would you suggest as sources for esteem and happiness for contemporary women? How are these related to your understanding of the Beatitude on meekness?

² Walter Wink, “The Other World Is Here,” *The Christian Century* (April 27, 1994), p. 443.