

Meekness and Mercy

[John Calvin](#)

Calvin preached 5 sermons on the Beatitudes between the years 1559 and 1564, while preaching an extended series on the Synoptic Gospels, which he never completed. He died three months later in 1564.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst on account of righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for mercy will be shown them (Matt. 5:5-7).

Then lifting up his eyes upon his disciples, he said, Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be filled (Luke 6:20-21a).

If we would only heed what nature teaches us we would enjoy the happiest state that humans could desire. For God has created all of us in his own image, so that we have only to look at our neighbour to see ourselves. We are one flesh. And although appearances and attitudes are very different, it is impossible to efface the unity which God has conferred on us. If only that were firmly etched in our minds, we would all be living at peace with each other, in a kind of earthly paradise.

The opposite, however, is the case. Everyone around us follows his own interests and looks to his own advantage; everyone wants to lord it over others. Hence our pride, our surliness, our venom the instant we are provoked. Harshness and even cruelty abound. We are vindictive and cause no end of trouble: it is as if lightning should fall from heaven every time someone is offended. So if in the course of life we endure many difficulties, we do not have to look far for the explanation: the pain men suffer comes from their fellow men. It is, of course, true that people all have their excuses. They want nothing better, they say, than to be gentle and mild-mannered, and to show patience toward those among whom they live. But, they add, it is not possible to deny our human nature: we must hunt with the hounds, because to be a sheep is to risk becoming someone else's dinner. That, then, is the excuse usually offered by men to cloak their actions. In reality so full are they of bitterness, arrogance, and pride that they cannot abide one another. It is all the more fitting, then, that we remember the lesson which the Son of God has for us here. For although we think we are hard done by when we

cannot retaliate against those who ill-treat us, he tells us that *it is the peace-makers and the meek who will possess the earth.*

Now common sense tells us such a thing is not credible. Experience, too, suggests that victory and success go to the boldest and most aggressive, while the unassuming dare not open their mouths to protest or complain, even though others may rob and fleece them of all they have. So common sense dictates that people who are meek will always suffer insult and abuse, unable even to find some small corner where they can draw breath or shake off their pursuers — lambs, so to speak, among a pack of wolves. For all that, our Lord Jesus Christ made no false claim when he promised that *the meek will inherit the earth.*

This teaching might make no sense to the worldly-wise; but believers have tasted enough of its truth to know that these are not empty words. For however much men may rage and continually fight, attack, steal, and commit other acts of violence, however much, I say, men may struggle to come out on top, if we candidly consider their real state of mind, we will find that the opposite is true. Everyone of necessity is their enemy. Naturally, if they manage to acquire the power of tyrants, no one will openly dare oppose them. Even so they will inwardly fret and fume; they know that they are friendless, and in their anxiety and agitation they distrust everybody. Blind suspicion, like a thorn-prick, drives them on, or like a sharp spike blinds their vision, filling them with panic and scattering them like lost souls who wrongly imagine that an enemy is after them.

And even supposing they had nothing to fear from other men, God would certainly show himself to be their judge. Just as they unsettle heaven and earth by their reckless action, so God unsettles them within: their conscience, as Isaiah says, will be like the storm-tossed waves of the sea. They will be at war with themselves, in a fine old state. They will never be at rest, as the prophet himself declares. That is why the law explicitly says that the life of such men hangs by a thread, that their eyes will be sunk in their foreheads, that their limbs will tremble and, when morning comes, they will cry: 'Will I live long enough to see night fall?' And when it is evening, they will ask: 'Will I manage to last through the night? Supposing I were attacked, what could I do?

Only those blinded by vanity, lies, and prejudice will fail to see how true Isaiah's prophecy is. We all know how it is with those who prey like wolves upon their fellow-men, who rob and devour and who, out of arrogance and pride, try to gain all they can. They never know a moment's peace. They may own the earth, they may be mighty lords, yet, wherever they tread, they are like dead men. For all their castles and fortresses and well-armed guards, the fact remains they are in prison. In the open field and with a numerous escort, they are insecure, in a constant state of fear and trembling.

In short, wherever they go, they see all too well that they are like Cain, without peace of mind and beset on all sides with anxiety. In possessing much they finally possess nothing, since they are incapable of enjoying what they think they have. That is how it is with all whom this world counts as great. Inwardly they are in a state of turmoil, although

in men's estimation they have no cause to be. Why, then, are they like this? It is because God brings trouble on those who bring trouble on everyone else. They are at their wits' end, seeing enemies all around them and judging every man, both great and small, to be a threat. For although no one dares say a word or lift a finger against them, they are greatly resented. The whole world may be mute and honours may be heaped upon them: God will nevertheless stretch out his hand to punish them as they deserve.

Conversely, the poor, who walk in sincerity and who patiently persevere, are secure; however many cruelties and trials they suffer, they are sure to inherit the earth, as Psalm 37 says. Although they may not own one foot of ground, nor meadow, vineyard, field, or house, they are persuaded that it is God who has placed them in this world; and although they may be like birds perched on a branch, they nevertheless can say with quiet assurance: 'God will direct my steps wherever I am. The earth too will welcome and nourish me for it was created for that end. God will allow me to find a home here, and he will care for me as his guest as long as it pleases him.'

When a person has that assurance, when he knows that God upholds and will continue to uphold him, he is infinitely richer than those who clutch and claw their way through life, and who in their haste to swallow everything are satisfied neither with kingdoms, duchies, countries, or towns. When their work is done, however, they have nowhere they can retreat to, no hiding-place, no refuge, for God is against them and every man is their enemy. Although believers are strangers and wanderers in this world, is not the home they have on earth much better than any earthly dominion, the source of so much torment to all who covet it?

Experience also teaches believers that God is watching over them. Imagine what would happen if it were otherwise. Think for a moment of the malevolence and fury of the unbelievers: they are the mirror-image of Satan their father! The world would be full of murderers, and all good, peace-loving people would soon be swept away, if God did not use his secret powers to keep them safe. That, I say, is what we can expect if we wilfully shut our eyes to the grace of God so clearly revealed in this passage.

What is more, we know that God has given us the Lord Jesus Christ to be our Shepherd. As such, his most vital work is to preserve our souls until we attain the eternal salvation which he has won for us. Nevertheless, even in this transitory life, he cares also for our physical being. Let us therefore be his sheep, for he is not a shepherd to wolves. If we choose to live like wild beasts, throw off all restraint, and contrive — as the saying goes — to add insult to injury, and if, as soon as we are offended or upset, we take up arms to avenge ourselves and try to create as much havoc as we can, we cannot expect Jesus to be our Shepherd. What he requires is that we hear his voice. Sheep and lambs hear their master's voice: let them be our example! If, then, we are honest and sincere, we will surely discover how strong a protector the Son of God is, for he will employ his Father's power to keep and sustain us.

The meek will inherit the earth. That is a notion which the human mind cannot entertain. Instead, it is commonly said that all who are gracious, sincere and long-suffering are poor fools; they would do better retaliating than allowing their good nature to be abused. Nevertheless, what Jesus elsewhere declares is true: the best and most preferable course is to maintain our sincerity, to practise patient endurance when we are maligned, not to render evil for evil but to overcome evil with good. If we do that, we will have found the one true way by which we may possess the earth. What, after all, do the bold and brutal seek, when men tremble to see them and dread their coming? Is not their aim to possess the earth, to rule it as a tyrant? Yes, that is what they covet for themselves.

But, as we have seen, they themselves are captive in every place on earth. In open fields, towns, castles, and fortresses — everyone is their enemy; they are at war with themselves; God pursues them wherever they may be.

As for us, we must constantly return to what God's Son declares to us, for what he says is eternally true and trustworthy. Let us be clear about this: provided, as he says, we exercise self-control and are patient, provided we possess that gentleness which he requires of us and to which he calls us, we will inherit the whole earth. With thankful, free and open hearts we will enjoy the good things which God in his kindness provides for us here. We are assured too that we will always be at peace, whatever troubles we are in.

That said, we should recognize that this promise is not yet totally fulfilled. It is enough that today we experience its truth in part. Scripture rightly says that the last day is the day of our redemption, the day on which God's children will be revived and restored. So we must patiently wait to possess the inheritance which Christ has promised, and to claim the earth as his gift to us. We should be content to pursue our course to the end and complete our earthly pilgrimage. Regardless of where we are, regardless of the trials we bear and the oppression and losses we endure, we should, I say, be content to trust God's assurance, and the testimony of our conscience, that all will be ours because we are his children and heirs. Furthermore, we should stop envying the proud, the violent, and the domineering who think they have everything when, like brute beasts, they have come out on top. That in essence is what this verse teaches us. We should therefore hate the devilish proverb which urges us to 'run with the hare and hunt with the hounds'. Instead we should place our Lord's protection above the impulse to retaliate or defend our cause. For his power to sustain us is unlimited, and he will prove immeasurably stronger than any foe. That, then, is what we have to grasp here.

Next, Scripture says, *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' sake, for they will be filled.* St Luke says simply, *Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be filled.* St Matthew adds the word 'righteousness' for the sake of precision. Even so he has been misinterpreted. Some have looked for a meaning higher and more subtle than is justified. We must be zealous, they say, for righteousness — that is, we must yearn for a more just and upright order, so that when God sees how earnest we are, he will change the world for the better and so gladden our hearts.

Now that is a perfectly good thing to teach in the proper context. The Gospel writers, however, fully and faithfully explain Christ's meaning here. From St Luke's words no such subtle or deep meaning can be derived. He does not say that we are to hunger for righteousness or that, in the face of so much evil, we should cry to God, begging him to set the world to rights. So when Scripture says, *Blessed are those who hunger*, it means the same as we saw before: blessed are those who mourn, who are poor in spirit and therefore distressed, and who turn to God for refuge and relief.

Why, then, does St Matthew add the word 'righteousness'? To express a perfectly appropriate idea. What he really means is that God's children will not only hunger and thirst — that is, suffer oppression, bereft of help and comfort — but that they will have right on their side, since they will not have given anyone cause to harm them. Not that they seek special privileges or favours for having injured no one. They do not try to win their case by underhand means. All they ask is that they be treated equitably and not harassed without cause. They have every right to feel this way, but their wish will not be easily or immediately granted. How wretched and unhappy they would be, were it not for the promise given here, that *they will be filled*?

That is how our Lord's words here are best understood. He first of all warns us that we will not enjoy a state of rest or repose, but that, on the contrary, we will hunger and thirst, and that our wish for all of life's necessities will be disappointed. We will not always find food and drink when we need them; or, if we are fed, we may be short of clothing or shelter. In the second place, he says that we will be sorely afflicted, that there will be no one to help whichever way we turn. It will be as if people might spit in our faces with perfect impunity!

That is a hard and bitter condition to endure, especially when we think of our own infirmities. For we are so frail that the merest nothing fills us with despair. Let us learn, therefore, to rest in the certain hope that we will finally be filled, and that God will supply everything we lack. If today we are like those who are at death's door, devoid of inner strength and outside help, if today we are in the direst of straits, let this hope support and sustain us, as we look to God whose work is to satisfy the hungry.

Is it surprising if, when we are in the right and when we seek no special advantage for ourselves, we should nevertheless experience hunger? We may indeed be innocent of aggression, anxious not to profit at someone else's expense and asking only justice and equity for ourselves: we are meant nevertheless to endure hunger and thirst. God will leave us to languish for a time in order to test our patience or our faith. For if today we were perfectly at ease, lacking nothing, surrounded by people eager to please and with no one to trouble or upset us, what would be the point of urging us to practise what is taught here?

To hunger and thirst is therefore, for us, a necessity. And since, as we have seen, we are to be meek, as men living among wild beasts whose teeth are sharp and whose claws are ready to tear, rend, and destroy us, we must press on in patience and sincerity. We should be hungry and thirsty for prayer to God. And although he allows us

to suffer affliction even when we are in the right, we should not give way to sadness, despair, or blind panic. We should hold firm to the expectation that, in the end, he will provide for all our needs. That is something else our text has to teach us.

Our Lord Jesus Christ goes on to add, *Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy.* Here again is a saying which is quite foreign to our normal way of thinking. Where else do we imagine happiness to lie, except in the absence of worry or distress? 'Leave us alone', we cry. 'Let others suffer in silence. We don't want to know. We don't wish to be bothered.' Peace of mind, indifference to anything else — it is enough if we are able to satisfy our physical wants and contemplate all earth's villainies without feeling sorrow, disquiet, or distress.

That is why many imagine they are blessed when they are at ease, able to live the good life without thinking of what is happening around them. They want only to block their ears so as to shut out news which might affect them. For there are two kinds of emotions which disturb us: unhappiness which arises from personal misfortune, and compassion when we see some poor person suffering beyond measure — someone, perhaps, who is unjustly oppressed, or who has lost all his worldly goods, unhappy orphans without fathers, wives without husbands, or unexpected events which, I repeat, greatly trouble us. Those who are looking for happiness (as they understand the term), seek to escape personal misfortune in the form of injury to themselves or loss of property. They love men's approval; they revel in entertainment, in laughter, in good fortune; they want flattery and praise. That is one point to consider.

But there is more. Supposing they are told, 'Do you see that poor wretch? He's suffering terribly. He has nothing — no money — and his health has gone. It's pitiful to behold.' News like that is a source of annoyance to worldly people. They, as we well know, will deliberately harden their hearts, and will not only not feel pity for the miseries which others endure, but will be perfectly content for everyone to go hungry. They may own large stocks of wheat, but the world's population can perish for all they care, providing their own wallets are filled. It doesn't matter to them if poor folk starve, as long as business is going well.

There are many more examples of this kind. All of them show how easy it is for men who scorn God to cast aside all pity and compassion, in order to avoid worry and trouble. Now Scripture says something very different here. We must patiently bear our own afflictions — a point we have already noted — but we must also bear the afflictions of our neighbour. We must assume their identity, as it were, so as to be deeply touched by their suffering and moved by love to mourn with them. We must weep with those who weep, as St Paul exhorts us to do.

We said earlier that although we are exposed to misfortune, trouble, oppression, and abuse, we can be truly happy because God blesses our sufferings when we look to him. In this verse, the Lord Jesus Christ takes believers one step further, teaching that as well as being meek and patient when we are afflicted, we must be at one with others in their distress, and so touched with compassion for their suffering as to look for ways of

helping them, as if their pain were ours. I say again, since God has brought us together in order to make of us one body, all members are necessarily one, and each individual must take his share of suffering, in order to relieve those who can bear no more. That is the truth we must grasp here.

What is pity? Briefly put, it is nothing else but the pain we feel at someone else's sorrow. A man may be healthy and content, with plenty to eat and drink, and safe from any threat of danger. When, however, he sees his neighbour in distress, he is bound to feel for him, to share his sorrow, to shoulder some of his burden and so lighten the load. That is what mercy is. The same idea is conveyed in our language by the word 'alms'. Unfortunately, the meaning of 'alms' has been misconstrued. What people mean by 'alms-giving' is not something inspired by feelings of humanity. Of course one can give to a poor person, but it is like a ransom, a tribute, or exaction given grudgingly and with reluctance. There is no suggestion that when a rich man gives of his substance, he says to himself, 'Here is a member of Christ's body, we are all joined together.' It is all the more important, therefore, to understand that helping others amounts to nothing unless we are moved by a love which comes from the heart, and which bids us bear our share of the misfortune we see around us. And because God has bound us all together, no one can turn away and live only for himself. There is no room here for the indifference which promises tranquillity and the pleasures of a comfortable life: we must enlarge our affections as the law of love requires.

So when we see some who are sick or poor or destitute, and others who are in trouble and distress of body or mind, we should say, 'This person belongs to the same body as I do.' And then we should prove by our deeds that we are merciful. We can proclaim our pity for those who suffer time without number; but unless we actually assist them, our claims will be worthless. There are plenty of people who will say, 'Oh dear! How terrible to be like that poor man!' Yet they simply brush it all aside, making no attempt to help. Expressions of pity stir no one into action. In short, this world is full of mercy if words are to be believed; in reality it is all pretence. St James vigorously condemns this attitude in chapter 2 of his Epistle. It is the height of insolence to say, 'Ah me, what a shame!', when no one is willing to lift a finger or even utter a word in order to help the distressed. We must learn, therefore, first to be kind and compassionate toward those who suffer; and then to make diligent use of the opportunities which God affords.

This verse has a promise attached to it, for we are notoriously slow to act. It is true also that what God's Son says here runs counter to our natural inclinations. We do not easily assent to it. The promise thus serves as a point of entry. For if the text simply said, *Blessed are the merciful*, we would reject it out of hand. When, however, Christ tells us that we are all in need of mercy, both from his heavenly Father and from our fellow men, and that we can only obtain it if we are merciful — that at least should prompt us to look more closely at ourselves. When we begin to savour the truth of what we are told here, we can only conclude that to be merciful is indeed part of the blessedness enjoyed by God's children. It is a simple fact that we all need mercy.

Take, for example, the person who has everything he could wish for in this world: many disappointments will nevertheless come his way. Even princes, kings, and mighty lords endure at one time or another terrible ordeals, suffering sometimes in body, sometimes in mind. Although they might seek to build secure nests for themselves high above the clouds, God shows that they are mortal after all. They are compelled to see themselves as mere men, frail creatures. If the mighty, who already have a kind of paradise to themselves, are in need of mercy, how much more are we?

If we thought carefully about these things, we would be moved to show pity every time we saw our neighbour suffering want or affliction. It might be objected that the world itself shows little pity to those who have had pity on others. Attend, first, to this point. God, we know, holds men's hearts in his hands. He turns them whichever way he wills. Even if evil and arrogance, mischief and spite abound, he lays upon men the burden of humanity. So although the world may have scant regard — indeed, contempt — for works of mercy done to the needy, God will nevertheless overrule so that, when we are in distress, he will not deny us our reward — mercy to the merciful.

This, as we will later see, is what our Lord Jesus Christ himself teaches, when he says that each of us will receive according to the measure we have given. St James, too, rightly declares that the person who has failed to show mercy will be judged without mercy.

Consider now this second point. Supposing God allowed such ingratitude to prevail among men that all our efforts to help the poor appeared wasted. What then? One day we must come before the great Judge. His mercy is our only hope. Supposing the world were full of cruelty and our good works a waste of time. We would have no less need of God's mercy. There is nothing in St James more fearful, more terrible than the words, *judgment without mercy*. If we had to appear before God's judgment seat to receive strict justice, what would become of us? It would have been better if we had been still-born, or had entered the world as fleas or lice or frogs — the lowest forms of life!

Since, then, our welfare and salvation depend wholly on God's mercy, should we not rejoice in his promise of pity and compassion when we, who have shown pity to our neighbour, lay before him our burden of pain? Is not God moved to welcome us, to be merciful to us, though because of our dreadful sins he might well have cast us out? Since we have this promise, we would have to be mad, out of our minds, to ignore the claims of mercy. That is what we have to remember here. It is a fact, moreover, that God allows us to taste at least in part what the Son confirms to us, for he is the true witness who has come from the Father's side to declare his will (as we read in chapter 18 of St John's Gospel).

Know then that when we have been merciful, we ourselves will receive mercy, even from men. And however evil and ungrateful they may be, God will press them so hard that when we are in need they will help us, though the idea of serving God and dispensing charity may be far from their minds. It will be with them as it was with the

Egyptians who, although enemies of God's people, were nevertheless compelled to hand over to them the most precious things they possessed.

In any case, we have higher things to think of. We must ultimately give an account of how we have lived: if we have been merciful, we will find that God is merciful to us. Moreover, mercy does not simply consist of compassion toward those I have been describing — the thirsty, the hungry, the sick, the hurt, and the oppressed. It requires us also to bear with the infirmities of those who, in themselves, deserve to be spurned. Of course, here as elsewhere, we must observe the balance which we find in Scripture. When we show mercy to those who have erred, we must never indulge them by outright flattery, nor ignore their wrongdoing so that it grows even worse. We should show pity when we see that our neighbours are still subject to many weaknesses, and we should be patient with them, not in order to imitate them but to rebuke their faults with kindness. We should never gloat as many do who laugh and smirk over someone else's misfortune. Instead, we should mourn and say, 'How sad, that poor man has given offence to God.' It should distress us to see someone perishing who has been so dearly redeemed by Christ's precious blood; it should distress us to see God's righteousness transgressed and his glory diminished.

Believe me, such things should awaken our compassion. That is how we will find mercy in God's sight — by having pity on those who have gone astray or who have stumbled through weakness; by bearing with them and trying to set them back on their feet. St Paul exhorts us to do both things: we are to exercise mercy without bias, being careful not to indulge the fallen; conversely we are not to be so harsh and extreme that we fail to support them. He tells us to rebuke those who have gone astray, but with meekness of spirit. Reflect, he says, that you too can sin; if you understand your own weakness, you will have pity on those who are sinners like you. In this way, then, we see how, in every time and every place, we are to exercise kindness: by having compassion on those who have done wrong, by helping those in need, by assisting those who are unjustly oppressed and by defending their cause, even though as a consequence wicked men may rise up in fury against us.

Concerning these things, note what is written in St Luke. *You yourselves are blessed*, he says. This is to show that it is not enough to have understood this teaching and to have declared it to be true. We must also, each of us, apply it personally. We must not allow words merely to pass before our eyes or echo in our ears, remembering nothing but *Blessed are those . . . , blessed are those . . .* Our Lord Jesus Christ intends all of this for our instruction. In the first place we must learn to be mild-mannered and patient in every trial. Next, to hunger and thirst, remaining meek even when we are unjustly persecuted though we have done no wrong. Lastly, we must learn to have pity on those who suffer, and be sincerely moved to help them as ability and opportunity allow. We must do all these things, without forgetting the word *now* which St Luke adds. This means that although God allows us to experience in this transient life the truth of his Son's teaching, its joyful fulfilment is kept for us until the last day. Let us, then, learn *now* — that is, amid the perplexities of this earthly life — to have pity on those who suffer,

and also to suffer ourselves, so that if we are troubled and afflicted, we remain gentle and kind, however much cruelty and brutality may be used against us.

At the last we will surely find that the one who spoke these words possesses all power; all dominion has been given him, and he will accomplish everything we read of in this passage, when he receives us into that heavenly union for which we now yearn.

I have a short announcement to make. The Town Councillors have agreed that our brother N, who has lately served as minister in Jussy, should be called to this city. He is to be presented on Sunday next. Since all church members have the right to be heard, anyone who has an objection concerning him should declare it to the Councillors between now and Sunday. Now let us cast ourselves down before the majesty of our good God, acknowledging our sins, and beseeching him to give us grace so to admit our faults that we may come to hate them. May we be made anew, so that we may overcome all our passions and tread down all desires of the flesh. May we make it our goal to follow the rule revealed to us by our good Master, and may we give ourselves to him in the expectation that he will be faithful and will keep the promises he has made to us. And may that expectation sustain us until our life's course is done. Therefore together let us say, Almighty God and heavenly Father . .

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