

# The New Testament Concept of Gentleness/Meekness

## I. Introduction - definition of the concept.

- A. In the New Testament, the words normally translated as "gentleness" and "meekness" have essentially the same meaning; and they will be used that way here. Both words refer to the way that Jesus' followers (and *all* people) are to interact with other people.
  - 1. Being a moral obligation, this character trait is required of *all* people, whether or not they want to believe the Bible. At the Day of Justice, *all* will answer to God for the way they lived, not just "believers."
- B. Definition of the concept
  - 1. To understand the concept, we can begin with the English dictionary definition, and modify it, as necessary, based on our observations of how Scripture uses the word.
  - 2. The following concepts are good descriptions of how the New Testament words are used. (For contrast, *opposite* concepts are also given.)
    - a. Kind, benevolent, peaceable, mild-tempered, yielding, considerate, thoughtful. NOT rough, harsh, violent, stubborn.
    - b. Patient, longsuffering, forbearing, having a calm spirit in adverse circumstances. NOT easily provoked or irritated, or having unbridled anger.
    - c. Appropriately humble and submissive to what God brings into our lives. NOT proud, self-sufficient, arrogant, stubborn, preoccupied with "self-expression"; NOT having a tendency to complain about what God brings into our lives.
  - 3. However, *modern* definitions tend to contain some concepts that are *not* in the New Testament:
    - a. Weak-willed, lacking in spirit or courage.
    - b. A couple of centuries ago, these concepts were not part of the *English* definition, either.

## II. Often a misunderstood concept.

- A. Many view gentleness/meekness as a form of *weakness*, not strength.
  - 1. Many people associate "strength" with characteristics such as violence, harshness, self-assertiveness, "survival of the fittest," forcefully obtaining one's "rights" (disregarding the effects of one's actions on others), etc.
  - 2. Gentleness and meekness are often thought of as *defective* character traits, expressions of weakness. This is because of the negative connotations that have become associated with the words (especially the word *meekness*).
- B. In contrast, Scripture defines gentleness/meekness the opposite way - as an expression of *strength*.
  - 1. Those characteristics described above (which the world often views as "strong") are actually expressions of *weakness*!
  - 2. Jesus' example illustrates this. He was gentle and meek (Matthew 11:29); but he was also strong, firm and purposeful.

- C. Jesus demonstrates that gentleness/meekness is not *weak*, but is fully compatible with a life of *strength*.
1. He was willing to stand up to the religious leaders of his day and warn them of their precarious spiritual condition. (An example of this is in Matthew 23.)
  2. He purposefully went to Jerusalem, knowing full well the death that was waiting for him (Matthew 20:17-19a). He did so, because it was the right thing to do, *in spite of* what he would experience. (He did not enjoy the thought of dying in such a horrible manner - Matthew 26:39.)
  3. Jesus remained strong and steadfast, to the point of death. The way he responded is a good example of gentleness/meekness in a time of injustice. When his enemies insulted and tortured him, he did not threaten them or attempt to retaliate. Instead, he gave us an example, by entrusting himself to the one who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23).

### III. Some basic observations about what the New Testament says.

- A. The concept of gentleness/meekness can be found in more than 20 passages in the New Testament, and additional times in the Old Testament (not a part of our study).
- B. From these verses, we can learn not only the concept of gentleness/meekness itself; but also its relationship to other godly character traits. All we need to do is pay attention to the context - the nearby verses.
1. Gentleness/meekness is associated with many godly character traits. (Example: Eight other character traits are mentioned in the list of the "fruit of the Spirit," Galatians 5:22-23.)
  2. Gentleness/meekness is often associated with humility. In fact, the concepts seem to overlap.
  3. Scripture often associates gentleness/meekness with the poor, oppressed and needy. A person doesn't *have* to be that way, in order to be gentle/meek. It's just that the poor and oppressed have a greater tendency to be genuine followers of Jesus, than do the rich and influential (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).
- C. We can also find out what character traits are normally NOT compatible with it.
1. Gentleness/meekness is not "reactionary," or ready to "explode" in a fit of rage. It does not result in a violent temper. Even when confrontation is necessary, it will be steady and purposeful. It will result in a *controlled* temper.
  2. Some specific examples of concepts that are its *opposite*, or are in some way *contrasted* to it:
    - a. Harshness (1 Peter 2:18).
    - b. A violent temper (1 Timothy 3:3).
    - c. "Coming to you with a whip" (1 Corinthians 4:21). In this case, the "whip" (the word being used figuratively) was a potential (and legitimate) response, but it was the *less desirable* option. Gentleness was the preferred way. The whip, or rod of discipline, was the *last resort*.
  3. The world may view some of these characteristics as expressions of strength; but Scripture describes them as less-desirable responses (at best), or as examples of weakness and sin (at worst). Some of them may be appropriate in specific circumstances; but they are *not* appropriate as a lifestyle.

#### IV. Who must have it?

- A. Everyone - God commands us to have it.
  - 1. Be gentle (Ephesians 4:2). This is part of the description of how to live worthy of our calling as Jesus' followers.
  - 2. Let it be an obvious characteristic in your life (Philippians 4:5). Why? Because Jesus is returning.
  - 3. "Clothe" yourselves with it (Colossians 3:12). Why? Because you are God's chosen people.
- B. The leaders.
  - 1. The leaders were to be an example for the people. They were also told to remind the people that gentleness/meekness was a *necessary* characteristic of their lives.
  - 2. It is one of the requirements for being a leader (1 Timothy 3:3).
  - 3. Timothy was told to "pursue" it (1 Timothy 6:11). In a previous verse, he was told to be an example for the rest of the church (1 Timothy 4:12).
  - 4. Titus was told to remind the people to have this characteristic (Titus 3:2).

#### V. Can an unsaved person have gentleness/meekness?

- A. Because of the grace of God, gentleness/meekness can be a "natural" character quality, even among those who do not know God.
  - 1. To varying degrees, non-Christians may have this characteristic (Acts 24:4), depending on the person's natural strengths and weaknesses.
  - 2. Even so, *all* natural abilities are weak and imperfect. The sinful nature has had a damaging effect on *everything* we do - all our thoughts and actions. Because of our sinful natures, what comes "natural" to us can *never* completely fulfill the obligations we have toward God and people.
- B. Jesus requires his followers to follow *his* example, and to have a gentleness/meekness that goes *beyond* what comes natural. This is possible only because of the Holy Spirit, who is in each *genuine* follower of Jesus.
  - 1. The Spirit of God gives us the ability to express this quality in ways not previously possible (having been hindered by our sinful nature). He uses the Word of God to teach us *how* to do so - using Scripture's commands, descriptions, examples to follow, etc.
  - 2. This will have an effect on how we respond, even in situations where gentleness/meekness does not come "naturally" - such as in times of persecution.
- C. The goal of a disciple:
  - 1. Our goal: to have a gentleness that is not fettered by the influence of sin. We can do this, to whatever degree we live according to the Spirit (who uses the Word of God to change us).
  - 2. We realize it will not be easy, since we constantly struggle with our old ways - the habits and values we learned before we began to follow Jesus.
  - 3. Even so, we know that our goal is *not* unreasonable, for it does not go beyond the capabilities we were originally created with! God is in the process of restoring us to the type of relationship that humans had with him (and with other people) *before* sin entered the world.

## VI. How can we get gentleness/meekness (the kind that goes beyond natural human abilities)?

- A. The gentleness God requires of us is inextricably bound to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit, and to the "wisdom that comes from heaven." We can get it *only* by being united with Jesus Christ (in salvation). When we become a follower of Jesus, it can (and will) be present in our lives, increasing in measure as we grow in Christ.
- B. It is part of the "fruit of the Spirit" - one of the results of the Spirit being present within us (Galatians 5:22-23).
  - 1. What this implies: If gentleness/meekness *isn't* present, it is because the Spirit *isn't* present. And if this lack of the Spirit characterizes our lives, it is because we are *not* genuine followers of Jesus.
- C. It is the fruit (or expression) of *genuine* wisdom - also known as "wisdom from heaven" (James 3:17). If we have this type of wisdom, gentleness/meekness *will* be present.
  - 1. Its presence is one of the ways we *demonstrate* that we have this type of wisdom (James 3:13).
  - 2. If it is *not* present, our lives are being characterized by "wisdom from the devil" (James 3:15).
- D. We will pay attention to Jesus' example.
  - 1. Jesus' life demonstrates that "meek" does not mean or imply "weak." It does not turn us into "pushovers." Rather, it is strong, firm and steadfast, even in the face of opposition.
  - 2. Jesus was gentle/meek, and he *commands* us to learn from his example (Matthew 11:29). If we are followers of Jesus, we will want to *follow* him! We will want to learn from him (observing in Scripture how he lived), so that we can better understand what gentleness/meekness is and isn't. We will want to "live it out" in our lives.
  - 3. Even as a leader: Jesus is described as a gentle, kind ruler over his people, one who was willing to associate with them (symbolized by his riding on the donkey). In this, he was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Matthew 21:5).
  - 4. His gentleness/meekness is not only the basis for the way *we* are to live; it is the basis for how we are to teach or command *others* to live (2 Corinthians 10:1). They have the same obligations as we do.

## VII. When/how should we be gentle/meek?

- A. It is to be a characteristic of our lives *all* the time. The opposite is *incompatible* with salvation!
  - 1. It is to characterize the way we respond in any situation that is a part of life, including those situations that are quite unpleasant. It should also influence our *attitude* toward people in any situation we may face.
  - 2. It should influence the way we do our "good deeds" (James 3:13) - and we should remember that there is *no* time when we *shouldn't* be doing "good deeds"! (The opposite of doing *good* is doing *evil*. Taking into consideration both the actions, as well as the *motives* for doing them, there is no such thing as doing "neutral deeds.")

- B. It must influence the way we respond to Scripture. This is the only way we can be saved!
  1. According to James 1:21, we are to receive with meekness the Word of God, which is able to save us. In this verse, many translations use the word "humility," because in this context, that word accurately describes the way this attitude expresses itself.
  2. But note the first part of v. 21. This attitude is associated with a willingness to *get rid of* our sin.
  
- C. It must influence the way we respond to the sins of others. This answers the question, "How should we respond to evil?"
  1. We *must* confront sin, or we ourselves are also guilty of sin. But we need to watch our attitude when doing so! We need to remember our own weaknesses, and *not* consider ourselves to be superior over those we confront. Also, we must remember that our goal is their repentance and salvation.
  2. Be gentle/meek when instructing those who oppose the truth (2 Timothy 2:25). Our hope is that God will grant them repentance and salvation.
  3. Be gentle/meek when restoring a Christian "brother" who has fallen into sin (Galatians 6:1). But we must remember our own weaknesses, lest we think more highly of ourselves.
  4. Be gentle/meek when explaining why we have confident hope in God, when others persecute us (1 Peter 3:15). Our goal is this: that they may become ashamed of their slander. Perhaps they will repent!
  5. Be gentle/meek when *appealing* to someone to do what is right. Jesus' gentleness can influence the way we make our appeal, and can be the basis for it (2 Corinthians 10:1).
  6. Though we must be gentle/meek when responding to evil, there *might* be a legitimate place for "turning over tables" (Matthew 21:12)! When we look at Jesus' life, we see that such was the case. There are many occasions on which he had to confront people. (A study of the context of each passage might help us to better understand *when* and *why* and *how*.)

### VIII. What are the results (consequences or benefits for us)?

- A. If we're followers of Jesus, we're going to *want* to be gentle/meek, *even without knowing the results listed below*.
  
- B. Here are some examples. These results may affect us now, or in eternity, or both.
  1. We will find rest (Matthew 11:29).
  2. We will be blessed, and will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5).
  3. It results in an inner beauty (1 Peter 3:4). A gentle/meek spirit is beautiful and unfading, even when our body is experiencing decay. This is what God values - and so should we.
  
- C. Something to consider: What consequences or detrimental effects might a person experience, if he *doesn't* have gentleness/meekness? (These would be the *opposite* of the above results.)