

Caution: Contents may be hot (Matthew 5:1-12)

## **The Beatitudes sneak up on us.**

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [January 16, 2002](#) issue

In these litigious days, fast food restaurants warn us of the obvious. Before biting into that deep-fried McDonald's apple pie, we read, "Caution: Contents may be hot." What looks like soft, sweet, greasy comfort food could scald your trusting tongue. The familiar treat is not harmless. It may bite you back.

The Beatitudes sneak up on us like that. These words of Jesus are so often quoted that they have become bland and mushy on the outside. "Blessed are the meek, the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the pure in heart." We tend to remember the parts that reflect the lowest common denominator, the "Have a nice day" goodness of our culture, the parts that go down easy like apple pie.

We tend to forget the hot insides, the news that the poor and the persecuted are not only blessed, but will gain the kingdom of heaven. We forget that you are blessed when people revile you and utter evil against you. And if God is blessing the peacemakers, what does that say about the warriors? What about the rich? What about the rich who call themselves "only comfortable"? What about those who are not persecuted? What about those who ignore the persecution of others? Caution: Contents may be hot.

Whenever this passage becomes too hot to handle, there is a sad, cowardly tendency in the Christian tradition of retreating to one verse: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Worried about revolution? Worried about redistribution of wealth? Pull out "Blessed are the meek," and throw it over any sparks that might ignite into a reordering of the world.

Thoughtful Christians must acknowledge that this one line is often twisted to keep workers from organizing unions, to keep wives from leaving battering husbands, to keep the oppressed from acting out in this world. Unscrupulous preachers have promised the meek that their reward will come in the afterlife—as if the rest of the Sermon on the Mount ignores justice, which it does not.

Jesus relates the concerns of the afterlife to suffering on earth, and blessing to struggle in this life, in order to call us back to life in the here and now. If correcting injustice affects our blessing, we should be more, not less, concerned about it.

For Jesus, the idea of blessing is not simply about the afterlife. For Jesus, coming out of the Jewish tradition, blessing affects life here on earth. Being chosen carries painful responsibility, as we see when Jesus offers the example of the prophets. And new life in Christ is not a layaway plan, a treat to be enjoyed later, after all the bills are paid off. We receive new life in Christ on credit, through a debt we can never pay. We get it now. Through sanctification we are changed, right here in the eschatological meantime.

So are the meek changed? Do they, once they are blessed, remain meek? Or are they transformed by the blessing? To my mind, “Blessed are the meek” says more about those who abuse power than it does about the virtues of being meek. The meek are the ones who are blessed, and not those who make them meek.

The city of New Haven is poor. We have the poor American city’s high infant mortality rates, the high AIDS rates, the high crime rates. The manufacturing base that once made Connecticut rich has mostly moved south or out of the country. My beloved city is a service economy that begs chain stores to move to town, and bends over backwards to please businesses with tax abatements. We compete with other struggling cities for the crumbs around the economic table. We have been meek, and we are not inheriting the earth.

A few years ago, I gained a new understanding of power through the congregation-based community organizing group here in town, Elm City Congregations Organized (ECCO). We were taught that power means the ability to act, and that power is a quality of the Godhead, something that God wants human beings to have. Power *with* others, sharing the ability to act with other people, is very different from wielding power *over* others.

A Kmart agreed to come to town, but only if it was allowed to sell guns. ECCO led a boycott that removed those guns from the store. Then we passed a law that prohibited liquor sales next to our schools. When our largest gun manufacturer threatened to move jobs south, we asked for our \$9 million in tax abatements. As I have watched church members cross denominational and theological boundaries to form relationships with one another, it feels as though the meek are inheriting the

earth. We are not inheriting the earthly power or the worldly wealth, but when Pentecostal and Catholic show up at city hall to make a plan to build affordable houses for the poor, we catch a glimpse of another, better kingdom.

The Beatitudes are not about standing on the sidelines, doing nothing and waiting for God to clean up our messes. In the Beatitudes, Jesus gives the blessing to those who, like the peacemakers, dare to mess with war.

There is no blessing for those who simply think about righteousness, but only for those who are truly hungry and thirsty for it. These are the people who live so passionately that they may find themselves in the midst of controversy. These are the people who will be reviled and persecuted by those who would prefer that they stay meek.

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