OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Wisdom Begins with Meekness

David Anguish

In James 3.13 — 4.12, James introduces to his letter several behaviors that are incompatible with friendship with God (4.4). These include bitter jealousy (πικρός, *pikros;* ζῆλος, *zēlos*), hedonistic desires (ἡδονή, *hēdonē*), selfish ambition (ἐριθεία, *eritheia*), quarrels (πόλεμος, *polemos*), and fights (μάχη; *machē*) (3.14, 16; 4.1–3). In the same section, he revisits failings he had previously addressed, including worldliness (1.27; 2.5; 3.6; 4.4), impurity (1.27; 4.8), double-mindedness (1.8; 4.8), and the demeaning of Christian brothers (cf. 2.1–7; 4.11–12). All represent failures to submit to God and resist the devil (4.7).

James's frank statements about these failings are part of the application of his teaching in 3.13–18. Utilizing the Jewish understanding of wisdom (see the background discussion *here*), he defines what authentic wisdom is and isn't, elaborates on the origins of godly and human wisdom, and details the character traits and outcomes that will be evident when believers pursue "the wisdom from above" (v. 17).

Theme Statement

The two sentences in James 3.13 constitute the theme statement for verses 13–18. James asks, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" Then, in a declaration of the standard for determining whether one is wise, he gives a concise summary of the Jewish view of wisdom: "By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom."

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His statement clarifies that wisdom is practical and will be evident in the good conduct that is typical of the works (ἔργον*, ergon*) associated with authentic faith (cf. 2.18). It also establishes that people will be wise only if they are characterized by meekness (πραΰτης, *prautēs*).

Defining Meekness

You have probably noticed that the world around us typically understands the word "meek" in terms of domination, weakness, and passivity. For example, Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines the term as: "(1) enduring injury with patience and without resentment : mild**;** a *meek* child dominated by his brothers. (2) deficient in spirit and courage **:** submissive; "I don't care," came the meek reply—Annetta Miller. (3) not violent or strong : moderate; his delivery varied from a meek, melodic patter to rapid-fire scriptural allusions—Bob Trebilcock." The dictionary also cites examples of the word's use on the web, including: (1) "Sweeney plays against type as a *meek*, dowdy wife fighting to find her voice. —Maureen Lee Lenker, *EW.com*, 8 Sep. 2024"; and (2) "The paintings, yes, thwart the racist stereotype that Asian women are *meek* and docile, but that's not a statement Ba is trying to make.—Ann Binlot, *ARTnews.com*, 5 Sep. 2024" (Merriam-Webster 2024).

"Meekness" is similarly defined: "the quality or state of being meek: a mild, moderate, humble, or submissive quality." Examples include the following: "He is accomplished in the art of approaching strangers, donning an air of such meekness and respect that no one can believe for long that he's a cop.—William Finnegan."

Even though these definitions and examples allow for a possibility of aggressive or forceful behavior, one cannot help but notice the prominence of words and phrases that assume timidity and weakness, such as "mild," "deficient in courage," "not strong," "dowdy," and "docile." This illustrates the common contemporary understanding that meekness means weakness, cowardice, being a doormat, etc. But that was not how the word was understood in the biblical period, a reality that needs frequent repetition because of the prevalence of the modern view.

In classical Greek prior to the NT period, "meek" (πραΰς, *praus*) was used to refer to a calm, soothing disposition in contrast to rage and savagery. Plato used it to refer to the man who remained serene in the midst of misfortune and calamity. Aristotle used it to imply the moderation that made reconciliation possible. Various writers used it in commendations of acts of kindness on the part of various rulers and generals (e.g., the Spartan general Brasidas). These references were grounded in a prior use of the word to refer to taming mules, horses, and other animals, or to speak of "taming" the barbarians (Spicq 1994, 160–161). [I am relying primarily on Spicq 1994 in this discussion of *praus*, but also recommend Bauder's (1976) article on "πραΰς" in *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2: 256–259.]

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In the OT and later Judaism, the word assumed the idea of submission. The LXX usually used *praus* (meek) and *prautēs* (meekness) to translate the Hebrew words עָנָו (*ʿānāw*) and עָנִי (*ʿāniy*) respectively (Spicq 1994, 166); *ʿāniy* is defined as, "needy, poor, afflicted, oppressed, often referring to a class of persons of low status and lacking resources → *afflicted*; *humble*; *needy*; *oppressed*; *poor*" (Kohlenberger & Mounce 2012, # 6401). The words were used to refer to

> "the humble of the earth" (Job 4:24), the abased, the poor, exploited by the wicked, to whom they have to give in. Therefore they are blessed by God (Zeph 3:12), who teaches them (Ps 25:9; cf. Matt 11:25), saves them (Ps 76:9; 147:6; 149:4), relieves them on the day of misfortune (Ps 94:13; *praynō*), and finally "toppling the thrones of the princes makes the *praeis* sit in their stead" (Sir 10:14; cf. Luke 1:51–53). These "humble possess the land" (Ps 37:11) and rejoice to hear Yahweh's praise (Ps 34:2). These, then, are religious people, whose outstanding model will be the Messiah-King, who appears not proudly on a noble war-horse but humble, mounted on an ass," to enter his capital (Zech 9:9; cf. Matt 21:5) (Spicq 1994, 167).

The human model for meekness in the OT is Moses, described as "very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth" (Num 12.3). His example illustrates "a religious quality involving radical submission to God and modesty in dealing with other people" (Spicq 1994, 167). I would add that as he submitted to God's direction, he also displayed a strength of character that cannot accurately be described with words like mild, docile, deficient in courage, or doormat. In light of his example, a good working definition of meekness is "strength under control."

As noted in Spicq's comments above, the OT's use of meek sets the stage for understanding its NT use. Two passages are especially worth emphasizing. In Zechariah 9.9, the promise of Israel's future deliverance centered in a king who arrived, not in a proud procession "on a noble war horse," but humbly (*ʿāniy*), mounted on the colt of a donkey—a poor man's ride. Psalm 37.11, which Jesus cites in Matthew 5.5, was part of a psalm of reassurance that YHWH will not forget his people; it recalled the land promises in Deuteronomy 4.1 and 16.20 and would have reminded Israel of God's promise to reward the faithful in the new age.

Spicq sums up the OT idea as follows: "OT *praytēs* is perfect submission to the divine will (Ps 132:1), and the Lord loves the combination of faithfulness and meekness (Sir 1:27; 45:4) that characterizes his people." Thus, to be meek is not to be spiritless, docile, or a cowardly doormat, but rather to be gentle and submissive to God's control. It is "the respectful attitude of a servant toward his master, always ready to submit" (Spicq 1994, 167). But if it is not weakness, it is also not *self*-mastery; it is the trait whereby we demonstrate the character of God in our lives because we have surrendered to God's direction.

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God: Where Wisdom Begins and Ends

In establishing meekness as the essence of what it means to show we are living under the direction of the wisdom that originates with God—the personification of which, remember, was ultimately embodied in Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1.30) (see the background discussion *here*)—James is never more *Christ*-ian. As noted above, in Matthew 5.5, Jesus echoes Psalm 37.11 in his delineation of the character traits we should assume in order to show authentic dependence on God (Matt 5.3–6). Following humility and penitence (vv. 3–4), meekness defines the essence of surrender to him in the new age, submission to God's taming that was "the condition of entering the new land of God's kingdom" (editorial comment by Colin Brown in Bauder 1976, 258). It thus prepares us to develop a voracious appetite for God and his righteousness (v. 6).

We are wise, therefore, when we humble ourselves (cf. Jas 1.9, 21; 4.6–7, 10) to the one who is the origin and embodiment of true wisdom and then imitate his wisdom in our lives (cf. 1 Cor 11.1; Eph 5.1; 1 Thess 1.6).

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