

Meekness: Pursuing Excellence in the Service of Others

Handout

What is meekness?

The strength to submit oneself to the will of another; the opposite of self-will.

Psalm 37:7-11 (ESV)

Be still before the Lord and wait
patiently for him;
Fret not yourself over the one who
prosper in his way,
over the man who carries out evil
devices!

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!
Fret not yourself; it tends only to
evil.

For the evildoers shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the Lord shall
inherit the land.

In just a little while, the wicked will be
no more;
though you look carefully at his
place, he will not be there.
But **the meek shall inherit the land**
and delight themselves in abundant
peace.

Moses: The Meekest Man (Numbers 12:3, ESV)

Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.

Group I: Moses' leadership criticized (Exodus 18, ESV)

Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the LORD had delivered them.... The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws." Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What

you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. Moreover, look for able men from all the people...[a]nd let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you...." So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said.... Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

Group II: Moses' leadership challenged (Numbers 16, ESV)

Now Korah...rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" When Moses heard it, he fell on his face, and he said to Korah and all his company, "In the morning the LORD will show who is his, and who is holy, and will bring him near to him. The one whom he chooses he will bring near to him. Do this: take censers, Korah and all his company; put fire in them and put incense on them before the LORD tomorrow, and the man whom the LORD chooses shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!" ...

And Moses said, "Hereby you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works, and that it has not been of my own accord. If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the LORD."

And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods....

But on the next day all the congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, "You have killed the people of the LORD." And when the congregation had assembled against Moses and against Aaron, they turned toward the tent of meeting. And behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared. And Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Get away from the midst of this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment." And they fell on their faces. And Moses said to Aaron, "Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to

the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone out from the LORD; the plague has begun.”

Group III: Moses' leadership corrupted (Exodus 32, ESV)

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” So Aaron said to them, “Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ...

And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”

But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain.... And as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it.

The “Young” Moses

Stage I. Moses the overachiever (Exodus 2, ESV)

One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together. And he said to the man in the wrong, “Why do you strike your companion?” He answered, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid, and thought, “Surely the thing is known.” When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian.

Stage II. Moses the reluctant (Exodus 3-4, ESV)

Then the LORD said.... “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”....And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt....”

Then Moses answered, “But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you.’” The LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.” And he said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. But the LORD said to Moses, “Put out your hand and catch it by the tail” – so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand – “that they may believe that the LORD...has appeared to you”....

But Moses said to the LORD, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.” Then the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” But he said, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.” Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, “Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well.... He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs.”

Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him, "Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."

Stage III: Moses the meek (see preceding excerpts)

Moses' Failure (Numbers 20, ESV)

Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron.... Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the LORD appeared to them, and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle." And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he commanded him.

Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and through them he showed himself holy.

Practical Meekness

Consider one of the following topics or another of your choosing. Using our discussion of Moses, place yourself and your communities on the scale of meekness development. Then ask what a meek perspective on the situation would look like. It may help to ponder the questions provided.

Relationships

C. S. Lewis, in "On Equality," argues that we must preserve our capacity to embrace hierarchy. But this seems wrong to us because we live in a sort of social hierarchy in which nobody is happy. Our relationships are plagued by jealousy; we jockey for social position, chafe against perceived inequities, and envy even our friends their successes. Articulate Lewis' vision in the language of meekness. How is this different from what we usually experience?

Self-Promotion in the Academy

All of us are under pressure to promote our work; indeed, if we do not demonstrate any enthusiasm for it, we can hardly expect anyone else to oblige. The question is whether it is possible to promote one's work without self-aggrandizement. The issue, of course, is that our work constitutes our identity – we see our work as an extension of ourselves, as a creation that looks like – or *is* – us. Thus, any promotion of our work is a promotion of our selves. What is needed is a change of perspective on our work.

1. Imagine a way of looking at one's work that avoids the problem described. How does self-promotion appear in this context?
2. Are any of your professors meekly self-promotional? How do they view their work?

Conflict

Conflict is painful when it happens, but it also provides the most striking opportunity to demonstrate meekness. We have all experienced what seemed to us the most intractable disagreements: allocation of lab space or resources, differences of vision with our advisors, control of an organization, and so on. Consider the role of meekness in conflict resolution, specifically seeking (and giving) forgiveness, gossip, and mediation.

Authority

Many of the events in Moses' career relate to his position as a leader. By virtue of being at Harvard, most of us have the potential to be leaders, and we have seen the importance of meekness in leadership. But we are also followers under authority – academic, political, perhaps ecclesiastical. Why do we bristle under authority? What are the consequences? How does meekness allow us to cultivate a healthy relationship with authority?

Racism

Last week we discussed racism as a failure to see the comprehensiveness of God's purpose for mankind. Consider racism from the perspective of meekness. For example, the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21, NIV).

1. How can one race or class "submit" to another?
2. What might the world look like if we humbled ourselves with respect to third world nations or inner city cultures? What might we learn from them?
3. Last week we were encouraged to make friends across cultural boundaries. What role does meekness play in this process?