

Meekly Drenched in Destiny

NEAL A. MAXWELL

I welcome you to a Christian campus where discipleship and scholarship are uniquely blended. I salute your ecclesiastical and academic leaders, so many of whom are with us tonight. They will serve you exceedingly well.

My brothers and sisters, as on another occasion at this pulpit, I will speak out of my own strugglings about another unglamorous but very crucial gospel objective. Then, the subject was *patience*, a virtue which is regarded by some as quite pedestrian but which is essential to our development and happiness.

A Companion Virtue to Patience

Our focus tonight will be on *meekness*, a companion virtue to patience. Meekness, too, is one of the attributes of Deity. Instructively, Jesus, our Lord and Exemplar, called attention to Himself as being “meek and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29). Paul extolled the “meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:1). The Greek rendition of the word *meek* in the New Testament, by the way, is *gentle* and *humble*.

Actually, meekness is not only an attribute essential for itself; Moroni declared that it is also vital because one simply cannot develop those other crucial virtues—faith, hope, and charity—without meekness. In the ecology of the eternal attributes these cardinal characteristics

are inextricably bound up together. Among them, meekness is often the initiator, the facilitator, and the consolidator.

Moreover, if one needs any further persuasion as to how vital this virtue is, Moroni warned, “none is acceptable before God save the meek and the lowly in heart” (Moroni 7:44). If we could but believe, really believe, in the reality of that bold but accurate declaration, you and I would then find ourselves focusing on the crucial rather than the marginal tasks in life! We would then cease pursuing lifestyles which, inevitably and irrevocably, are going out of style!

There would be little reason for speaking to you of meekness if you were not serious candidates for the celestial kingdom. You live in coarsening times, times in which meekness is misunderstood and even despised. Yet meekness has been, is, and will remain a non-negotiable dimension of true discipleship. Its development is a remarkable achievement in any age, but especially in this age.

Neal A. Maxwell was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 5 September 1982.

Furthermore, whether you realize it or not, you are a generation drenched in destiny. If you are faithful, you will prove to be a part of the winding-up scenes for this world, and as participants, not merely as spectators, though on later occasions you might understandably prefer to be the latter.

Why So Important?

Even so, why the stress on meekness? Merely because it is nice to be nice? The reasons are far more deeply imbedded in the “plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8) than that!

God, who has seen billions of spirits pass through His plan of salvation, has told us to be meek in order to enhance our enjoyment of life and our mortal education. Will we be meek and listen to Him and learn from Him? Or will we be like the Gadarene swine, that pathetic example of *totus porcus*—going whole hog—after the trends of the moment?

Perhaps, brothers and sisters, what we brought with us as intelligences into our creation as spirit children constitutes a “given” within which even God must work. Add to that possibility the clear reality of God’s deep commitment to our free agency—and we begin to see how essential meekness is! We need to learn so much, and yet we are free to choose (see 2 Nephi 2:27)! How crucial it is to be teachable! There “is no other way” in which God could do what He has declared it is His intent to do. No wonder He and His prophets emphasize meekness time and time again!

Since God desired to have us become like Himself, He first had to make us free, to learn, to choose, and to experience; hence our humility and teachability are premiere determinants of our progress and our happiness. Agency is essential to perfectibility, and meekness is essential to the wise use of agency—and to our recovery when we have misused our agency.

Let us not brush by this developmental premise. The scriptures concerning life’s purposes do make it clear that we *are* to become

like the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

“Therefore I would that ye should be perfect even as I, or your Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48). “Therefore, what manner of men [and women] ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). It is an awesome objective—impossible of attainment without meekness.

The Father and our Savior desire to lead us through love, for if we were merely driven where They wish us to go, we would not be worthy to be there, and, surely, we could not stay there. They are Shepherds, not sheepherders.

In that premortal council, wherein Jesus *meekly* volunteered to aid the Father’s plan, He said, “Here am I, send me” (Abraham 3:27). It was one of those special moments when a few words are preferred to many. Never has one individual offered, in so few words, to do so much for so many as did Jesus when He *meekly* proffered Himself as ransom for us, billions and billions of us!

In contrast, we see in ourselves, brothers and sisters, the unnecessary multiplication of words—not only a lack of clarity, but vanity. Our verbosity is often a cover for insincerity or uncertainty. Meekness, the subtraction of self, reduces the multiplication of words.

Without meekness, the conversational point we insist on making often takes the form of *I*, that spearlike, vertical pronoun. Meekness, however, is more than self-restraint; it is the presentation of self in a posture of *kindness* and *gentleness*. It reflects certitude, strength, serenity; it reflects a healthy self-esteem and a genuine self-control.

So in matters little or large, if our emulation of the Lord is to be serious, we must do more than note and admire Jesus’ meekness. He passed through “all of these things” which gave Him, too, needed experiences.

Development Gradual, Sometimes Painful

However, meekness is one of those attributes acquired only by experience, some of it painful, for it is developed “according to the flesh” (Alma 7:11, 12). It is not an attribute achieved overnight, nor is it certified to in but one exam; rather, it is certified to “in process of time” (Moses 7:21, 68, 69). The Savior said we are to “take up [the] cross daily” (Luke 9:23)—not just once or occasionally—and taking up the cross daily surely requires meekness.

There is, of course, much accumulated stereo-typing surrounding this virtue. We even make nervous jokes about meekness, such as, “If the meek intend to inherit the earth, they are going to have to be more aggressive about it!” We even tend to think of a meek individual as being used and abused—as being a doormat for others. However, Moses was once described as being the most meek man on the face of the earth (see Numbers 12:3), and we recall his impressive boldness in the courts of Pharaoh and his scalding indignation following his descent from Sinai.

President Brigham Young, who was tested in many ways and on many occasions, was once tried in a way that required him to “take it”—even from one he adored and admired. Brigham “took it” because he was meek. Yet, surely, none of us sitting here would think of Brigham Young as lacking in boldness or firmness. However, even President Young, in the closing and prestigious days of his life, spent some time in courtrooms being unjustifiably abused. When he might have chosen to assert himself politically, he “took it”—meekly.

Fortunately, you and I have had a chance to see, at rather close range, the remarkable meekness which operates in the life of President Spencer W. Kimball. His, too, is an impressive meekness which has combined with sweet boldness, producing signal achievements in the Kingdom.

Granted, none of us like, or should like, to be disregarded, to be silenced, to see a flawed argument prevail, or to endure a gratuitous discourtesy. But such circumstances as these seldom constitute that field of action from which meekness calls upon us to retire gracefully. We usually do battle unmeekly over far less justifiable issues, such as “turf.”

Just what is this “turf” we insist on defending at almost the slightest provocation? If it is real estate, it will not rise with us in the resurrection. If it is concern over the opinions of us held by others, there is only one opinion of us that really matters. Besides, the opinions of others will only be lowered if we go on and ego tantrum. If “turf” is status, we should not be overly concerned with today’s organizational charts. Who cares now about the peck order in the Sanhedrin of A.D. 31 which meant so much to some at the time?

Granted, there are some things worth being aroused about, as the Book of Mormon says, such as our families, our homes, our liberties, and our sacred religion (see Alma 43:45). But, if all our anxiety amounts to is our so-called image, it’s an image that needs to be displaced anyway, so that we can receive His image in our countenances (see Alma 5:14).

Further Consideration

Let us consider meekness further.

The meek are filled with awe and wonder with regard to God and His purposes in the universe. At the same time, the meek are not awe-struck by the many frustrations of life; they are more easily mobilized for eternal causes and less easily immobilized by the disappointments of the day.

Because they make fewer demands of life, the meek are less easily disappointed. They are less concerned with their entitlements than with their assignments.

When we are truly meek, we are not concerned with being pushed around but are grateful to be pushed along. When we are truly

meek, we do not engage in shoulder-shrugging acceptance but shoulder-squaring—in order that we might better bear the burdens of life and others.

Meekness can also help us in coping with the injustices of life—of which there are quite a few. By the way, our experiences with mortal injustices will generate within us even more adoration of the perfect justice of God—another of His attributes. Besides, there can be dignity even in silence, as was the case when Jesus meekly stood, unjustly accused, before Pilate. Silence can be an expression of strength. Holding back and holding on can be signs of great personal discipline, especially when everyone else is letting go.

Furthermore, not only are the meek less easily offended, but they are less likely to give offense to others. In contrast, there are some in life who seem to be waiting to be offended. Their pride covers them like boils which will inevitably be bumped.

Meekness also cultivates in us a generosity in viewing the mistakes and imperfections of others:

Condemn me not because of mine imperfection, neither my father, because of his imperfection . . . but rather give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been. [Mormon 9:31]

Those of us who are too concerned about status or being last in line or losing our place need to reread those words about how the “last shall be first” and the “first shall be last” (Matthew 19:30). Assertiveness is not automatically bad, of course, but if we fully understood the motives which underlie some of our acts of assertion, we would be embarrassed. Frankly, when others perceive such motivations, they are sometimes embarrassed for us.

Granted, the meek go on fewer ego trips, but they have far greater adventures. Ego trips,

those “travel now and pay later” indulgences, are always detours. The straight and narrow path is the only path which takes us to new and breathtaking places.

Meekness means less concern over being taken for granted and more concern over being taken by the hand. Less concern over revising our own plans for us and more concern about adopting His plans for us are other sure signs of meekness.

When you and I sing that Church hymn with the words, “More used would I be” (P. P. Bliss, “More Holiness Give Me,” *Hymns*, no. 114), one condition which keeps us from being “more used” is our lack of meekness. Sometimes, too, brothers and sisters, in our prayers we ask for the Lord to take the lead of our minds and hearts, but as soon as we say “Amen,” we go unmeekly in our predetermined directions.

Meekness does not mean tentativeness, but thoughtfulness. Meekness makes room for others: “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Philippians 2:3).

Examples, Good and Bad

There are, brothers and sisters, ever so many human situations in which the only additional time and recognition and space to be made available must come from the meek who will yield—in order to make time and recognition and space available for others. There could be no magnanimity without humility. Meekness is not a display of humility; it is the real thing. True meekness is never proud of itself, never conscious of itself.

It was said of one able, but comparatively meek, member of a nineteenth-century British cabinet, serving in Parliament:

If it was his duty to speak, he spoke, but he did not want to speak when it was not his duty—silence was no pain and oratory no pleasure to him.

[Forrest Morgan, ed., *The Works of Walter Bagehot* (Hartford, Connecticut: Travelers Insurance, 1889)]

The meek think of more clever things to say than are said. And it's just as well, for there is so much more cleverness in the world than wisdom, so much more sarcasm than idealism.

It is quite understandable, brothers and sisters, that we admire boldness and genius as we see these qualities convinced in some of the great figures in history. A merciful God has let such individuals make their significant contributions to humanity, such as in the political and economic realms. I cannot help but wonder, however, what more God might have done with such individuals if they had been sufficiently and consistently meek.

I think, for instance, of the towering and courageous Winston Churchill, admired in so many ways, including by me, but who had serious difficulty containing his ego which sometimes tarnished his otherwise remarkable contributions. One winces, even at this late date, as he reads Balfour's rebuke, in 1905, of a pressing and eager young Churchill in Parliament. Just after Winston had been excessive, Balfour rose in dignity and said:

As for the junior member of Oldham . . . I think I may give him some advice which may be useful to him in the course of what I hope may be a long and distinguished career. It is not, on the whole, desirable to come down to this House with invective which is both prepared and violent. The House will tolerate, and very rightly tolerate, almost anything within the rule of order which evidently springs from genuine indignation aroused by the collision of debate. But to come down with these prepared phrases is not usually successful, and at all events, I do not think it was very successful on the present occasion. If there is preparation, there should be more finish, and if there is so much violence, there should certainly be more veracity of feeling.

[Ted Morgan, *Churchill: Young Man in a Hurry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 175.]

I think, too, of the remarkable General of the Army Douglas MacArthur whose place in history will also be rightfully generous. His mistakes, too, usually occurred as a result of a lack of meekness; his bravery was, on occasion, matched by his vanity. The brilliant and victorious seafarer, Admiral Nelson, both achieved and suffered similarly.

I am not trying to fault these individuals, for each has significantly added to the measure of freedom so many mortals have enjoyed. Rather, I am suggesting how important to genuine and lasting greatness the virtue of meekness is, for its absence constitutes a limitation—even upon those whom we judge to be great by worldly criteria.

Granted, we admire boldness and dash, but boldness and dash can so easily slip into pomp and panache.

Proper Use of Power and Authority

By contrast, the meek are able with regularity to peel off the encrustations of ego that form on one's soul like barnacles on a ship. They are thus able to avoid the abuse of authority and power—a tendency to which, the Lord declared, “almost all” succumb. Except the meek. The meek use power and authority properly, no doubt because their gentleness and meekness reflect a love unfeigned, a genuine caring. The influence they exercise flows from a deep concern:

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned. [D&C 121:41]

How anxious we ought to be to emulate the manner in which God wields power! And this in a world of push and shove and shout. If we become too efficient at pushing, shoving,

and shouting, then we are too adapted to this world—too busy polishing skills which will ere-long become obsolete.

Meekness rests on trust and courage. It is reflected in Nephi’s meek acceptance of an assignment when he said, “I will go and do” (1 Nephi 3:7), without knowing beforehand all the implications of what he was undertaking.

Meekness permits us to be confident, as was Nephi, of that which we do know—even when we do not yet know the meaning of all other things (1 Nephi 11:17). Meekness constitutes a continuing invitation to continuing education. No wonder the Lord reveals His secrets to the meek, for they are “easy to be entreated” (Alma 7:23). Not only are the meek more teachable, but they continuously receive, with special appreciation, “the engrafted word” (James 1:21), as the apostle James said—and, as Joseph Smith described it, the pure flow of intelligence (see *Teachings*, p. 151)—all from the divine databank.

If we are meek, we will also handle our critics more wisely than did these predecessors:

Now there was a strict law among the people of the church, that there should not any man, belonging to the church, arise and persecute those that did not belong to the church, and that there should be no persecution among themselves.

Nevertheless, there were many among them who began to be proud, and began to contend warmly with their adversaries, even unto blows; yea, they would smite one another with their fists. [Alma 1:21–22]

Meekness will permit us to endure more graciously the cruel caricaturing and misrepresentation that accompany discipleship, especially in the rugged last days of this dispensation. Remember the fingers of scorn in Lehi’s vision which pointed and mocked at those who clung to the iron rod (see 1 Nephi 8:26–33)? The mockers were not a small minority. And they were persistent and preoccupied

in their scorn of the saints. You will come to see that preoccupation.

Meekness permits us to be prompted as to whether to speak out or, as Jesus once did, be silent. But even when the meek speak up, they do so without speaking down.

I stress again that meekness does not mean we are bereft of boldness. A meek, imprisoned Joseph Smith displayed remarkable boldness in rebuking the grossness of the guards in Richmond jail:

Silence, ye fiends of the infernal pit! In the name of Jesus Christ I rebuke you and command you to be still; I will not live another minute and hear such language. Cease such talk, or you or I die this instant! [HC 3:208, note]

Isn’t it interesting, in a world wrongly impressed with *machismo*, that we see more and more coarseness which is mistaken for manliness, more and more selfishness masquerading as individuality?

Meekness can make another very significant contribution as it aids us in bearing up under our personal afflictions (see Mosiah 3:19). Since the Lord has said he will have a “tried people,” how can we possibly endure without meekness, the factoring experiences of this mortal probation?

The World Takes a Different View of Meekness

Illustratively, I turn now to an excerpt from President Brigham Young’s secretary’s journal for a choice insight brought to my attention by Professor Ronald Esplin. When asked in conversation, “Why are men left alone and often sad? Why is not God always at man’s side promoting universal happiness at least for His Saints? Why does not God do everything for man?” President Young responded concerning how man’s divine destiny requires individual experience and practice in learning “to act as an independent being”—to see what we will

do, whether we will be “for God or not”—and in developing our own resources. Such experiences will teach us to be “righteous in the dark—to be a friend of God” (Brigham Young Office Journal, 28 January 1857). This is a sobering and revealing insight about God’s plans for us here, and it underlines with urgency the need for the attribute of meekness, especially when one feels forsaken and forgotten and alone “amid th’ encircling gloom” (J. H. Newman, “Lead, Kindly Light,” *Hymns*, no. 112).

In spite of all these advantages of meekness, will the world mistake meekness, however, for something else? Yes. But we must not let the world call the cadence for our march through life any more than we would let the world set the direction of that march.

Brothers and sisters, this mortal experience through which we are passing is one in which beauties abound; subtleties and delicacies are all about us, waiting to be noticed. Wonders are everywhere to be seen. It is, however, the observing meek, who will contemplate the lilies of the field, will ponder the galaxies and see God moving in His majesty and power. It is also the meek who will notice, and then lift up, those whose hands hang down (see D&C 81:5).

Peter waxed poetic when he urged “the Ornament of a meek and quiet spirit” (1 Peter 3:4). The meek and quiet spirit, which Peter recommended, is essential to our happiness here and hereafter, men and women alike.

Besides, even if our being meek results in our being abused in this world, we need to remember that we are being fitted for chores in another and better world—one which will be everlasting, not fleeting.

Some may still say, however, “Does not meekness invite abuse and dominance by the unmeek?” It may. But life’s experiences suggest that sufficient unto every circumstance are the counterbalancing egos thereof; force tends to produce counterforce.

Please do not think of meekness, therefore, in the stereotyped ways. You will see far more examples of those in desperate need of meekness than you will ever see of the truly meek being abused.

Development of Meekness Difficult

I do not say that the development of meekness is easy. There are strivings and struggles and setbacks, inching forward when we would prefer to run. Even when we make some progress, there is the sober realization that our very best meekness is but a pale copy to Jesus’ meekness. But it is “a type and shadow of things which are to come: (Mosiah 13:10). None of the divine virtues is easy to develop. But each is possible and portable. None of them will ever be obsolete.

Besides, what are the alternatives?

Genius unmodified by meekness? History amply attests that such is both a blessing and a curse! Expertise wrapped in overmuch ego? It is so difficult to utilize. Boldness and swiftness unrestrained by gentleness? Such traits are as likely to trample on people as to lift them!

It is meekness, therefore, that helps us to step gratefully forward to place on the altar the talents and time and self with which we are blessed—to be at God and His children’s disposal. The offering is of a gentled self, a self concerned with charity—not parity.

Yes, there are real costs associated with meekness. A significant down payment must be made. But it can come from our sufficient supply of pride. We must also be willing to endure the subsequent erosion of unbecoming ego. Furthermore, our hearts will be broken in order that they might be rebuilt. As Ezekiel said, one’s task is to “make you a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 18:31). There is no way that such dismantling, such erosion, such rebuilding can occur without real cost in pain, pride, adjustments, and even some dismay. Yet since we cannot be “acceptable before

God save [we are] meek and lowly in heart” (Moroni 7:44), the reality of that awesome requirement must be heeded. Better to save one’s soul than to save one’s face.

Conclusion

I have spoken to you of this fundamental attribute because you truly are a generation drenched in destiny. May it prove to be meekly drenched in destiny. The attainment of your full possibilities will depend, as with all of us, on your developing adequately the eternal and cardinal attributes, including meekness.

God bless you and those like you the world over. Depend, meekly, upon God, for each of you—in ways yet to be experienced—will be depended upon by ever so many others.

I love you; I bless you, in apostolic authority, that you will not fail your individual rendezvous with those who await your touch and your ministry. Do not fail them! Prepare yourself in meekness to serve them, and God will bless you. I so bless you in that authority and in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.