

The Way Up Is Down

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The Way to Grace: The Sermon on the Mount Series

Matthew 5:4-5

One of the shocking things about the Bible and, particularly, the Sermon on the Mount which I just started last week is that Jesus says things that virtually no one else on earth ever says. It is the words of Jesus that we are going to look at today. We are going to discover that they are almost exactly the opposite of most of the self-help literature most of us read most of the time. I think the Sermon on the Mount really does call us to consider our fundamental loyalties and our fundamental attitudes and whether we are really committed to follow Jesus or, instead, we have really adopted a very different philosophy of life—a therapeutic approach to life, a self-help approach to life, or an American middle-class approach to life.

As I considered the two verses that form the text for today's message, the picture that came to mind was that of walking into an office building on the ground floor and talking with the security person behind the desk concerning directions to one of the corporate offices. The security officer says, "Well, his office is on the 16th floor. You can take one of those elevators on our left. Make sure you push the down button, otherwise you won't reach the Penthouse."

You say, "I am sorry? I push the down button to get to the Penthouse? Is there some kind of wiring problem?"

The guard smiles and says, "No, that is just the way our business works. Our corporation works on very different principles than most businesses."

You say, "Well, what kind of crazy corporation is this? I thought I was entering a successful international corporation. One that had branch offices all over the world. But now I am not so sure."

The guard says, "Oh, friend, we are highly successful. We have sales reps in virtually every major city in the world. And we are penetrating markets that, even a generation ago were closed to us. Why the whole eastern block has opened up to our company now. We even have had recent success among Muslim people in Asia. Our employees, boy especially those who are faithful to the company, they get benefits and bonuses and a retirement plan that is at the top of our industry."

You say, "Well, that makes me feel a lot better. But I am still confused about your elevators and the big sign that you have on the wall—your corporate creed that says, 'Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it.' You seem to have a lot of very confusing perspectives around here."

The guard says, "Well, I don't know about that, but I know that the boss loves to say things like: 'The first will be last and the last will be first;' and 'The way up is down and the way down is up.'"

You might inquire if you had walked into such a place: What is the name of this company again? Maybe I have the wrong address.

Of course, the answer is the Kingdom of God.

I don't think we appreciate the shocking nature of Jesus' statements, how paradoxical they are, how often Jesus says "the way up is down", "the first is last, the last is first" because for many of us the statements have become like words of an old familiar song. We are so used to them. Some of us have heard Jesus' words since we were small. Now, I didn't. But some of you have. And like the words of an old familiar song, you stopped listening. The words lose their edge.

I told you that little parable because I think if you heard the statements of Jesus and the perspectives of Jesus for the first time, you would be like that man who wandered into that office building. You would be completely confused. You would wonder how does this thing work at all? How can there be any success here? How does the kingdom of God have people all over the world? How did this thing spread? Surely it couldn't spread by a philosophy that the way up is down.

J.D. Philips juxtaposed the corporate credo of the kingdom of God, "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," and the two verses that we are going to read today, "blessed are they that mourn for they will be comforted," and "blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." J.D. Philips juxtaposed that corporate credo of the business known as the Kingdom of God with the corporate credo of the business that is known as the Kingdom of this World. Listen to the contrast.

Philips writes, "Happy are the pushers for they get on in the world. Happy are the hard boiled for they never let life hurt them. Happy are those who complain for they get their own way in the end. Happy are the blasé for they never worry over their sins. Happy are the slave drivers because they get results. Happy are the knowledgeable men of the world for they know their way around. Happy are the troublemakers for they make people take notice of them."

We would add to that, "Happy are the ruthless, the self-assertive, the aggressive, the wealthy, the hard bodied, the popular, the smiling..." They are the winners.

But Jesus says, "No. Blessed are those who mourn, for they are the ones who will be comforted. And blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed is the widow because she is the one who I pay attention to. And the little child. And the unpopular government official. And the addict. The brokenhearted.

Friends, I think it is appropriate that we really ask ourselves today if Jesus was serious when he said what he said in the Sermon on the Mount. Did he really mean this or is this just a bunch of religious words and empty promises held out for losers, people who can't succeed, people who are stupid, failures. Is Christianity a philosophy for losers? For people who are the dregs of society? But for those who want to succeed, those who want to achieve, those who want to do something with their lives, you will find nothing here.

I raise that question because regarding every issue of obedience: should I stay married or should I get divorced; should I have premarital sex or should I

wait; should I give my life to Jesus or should I manage my life myself? The ultimate question is: Does Jesus know what he is talking about? Does he understand the way life works? Does he have a clue as to how people really get blessed? Is there anything to what he says?

It is so antithetical to our thinking. We say it is better to accumulate. That is the way we live. We build bigger and bigger and bigger houses. We say it is better to accumulate than to give.

Jesus says, "No, it isn't."

Now, I will tip my hand a little bit in terms of how I would see a way out of this box that I have constructed. If you were here last week you heard me communicate a perspective on the Sermon on the Mount. I said that the Sermon on the Mount, to me is Jesus' message on the way to receive God's grace. What Jesus is teaching us in the Sermon on the Mount is that by setting and oriented our attitudes in a certain way, we put ourselves in the position of being able to receive the grace of God—his blessing, his presence, his favor, his hand on our lives. A large part of the answer regarding the way we think we are going to win life's lottery concerns whether we think the big winner is the one who has the most of God. Is the big winner the one who has the most of God's favor, the most of God's grace, the most of God's presence? Or is the big winner the one who has the most clothes in their closet and the most money in their bank account?

You say, "Rich, why can't I have both? Why can't I have the most of God but also take a heaping portion of what this world has to offer?"

I would say to you that maybe you can. Maybe you are one of the people that Jesus cracked the door on. Maybe you are one of the few who Jesus was talking about when he said that it is hard, but apparently not impossible, for a rich person to enter the Kingdom. Maybe you are one of the people that made it in. And you are enjoying as much of God as you possibly could.

But what if you are not one of those anointed few? What if you are like the mass of humanity that Jesus' words apply to? And that Jesus was really speaking the truth when he said that it was better to give than receive. And when he said that in order to be filled, you first have to be empty. And when he said that to follow him you had to practice self denial daily. What if Jesus was telling the truth that many of our choices really do cut us off from God? What if Jesus really did know what he was talking about when he said that the road that we are driving on so hard and so fast has a curve in it that you can't see. And if you chose to go down that road, you are going to be a loser. That even though it seems that you are just passing everyone by right now, and all the rest of the folks who follow Jesus hard are suckers, that in the end you are going to be a loser.

I decided to not take the hard edge off of Jesus' statements today. We are tackling two of the toughest statements in the Bible: Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. And Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. In teaching these two very difficult statements, I have called today's message, "The Way Up is Down." Let's pray.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:4 this statement: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Putting it in the context of the Sermon on the Mount, we might say if you want to find the grace of God, if what you value in life is a relationship with God, if you have discovered that the one who is supremely valuable and satisfying and makes life worth living is God and you want him, then set your heart on mourning. Join with the mourners. Be among those who grieve.

You say, “That is not the way I want to live life. Me and my honey, we just want to travel down the road of life in our Miata, laughing and listening to music. Smooching. We just want to play hard, work hard and squeeze every bit of enjoyment out of life that we can before we drop dead at a very healthy old age.”

That’s great. The problem with that view of life is that the way of life is not straight and smooth for anybody. There are curves, as I mentioned before, that you can’t see. There are pot holes along the way and mud slides and broken shoulders—things like the death of your parents, the illness of your spouse, getting stabbed in the back by a friend, the handicap of a child. What then? What if your philosophy of life is not really capable of driving you down the road of life the way that life really comes to us? What if you find that you really do need more than just yourself, that you need help, some assistance. That you need God? How would you find him? How would you get in touch with him?

Friends, the reason why most of us have very little experience of God, I don’t mean belief in God, most Americans believe in God; I don’t mean a doctrine about God or a proper theology of God; the reason why most of us have very little experience of God, why most of us feel his presence, why we drink so little comfort from God is because we have not employed Jesus’ methods of finding God.

Jesus said the way up is down. The way to find the grace of God is to mourn, to grieve, to be sorrowful.

You say, “What should I mourn about? My life is going pretty well. I don’t have many problems right now. We are doing pretty okay.”

Well, if you value God, if you see him as the one who is ultimately satisfying, who is ultimately fulfilling, then you will mourn about your sins.

Let me make this really plain. I think that many of us only experience a drop of the grace of God because our confession of our sins and our openness about our sins to God only goes one millimeter deep. The reason why we don’t feel God penetrate us to the core of our being is because we have rarely experienced, to truly mourn, over our sins. Most Christians do have a very superficial relationship with God. We know a great deal about God but we are really looking to lots of other things in life to give us real fun and real zip. We have lots of other oars in the water to propel our boat forward. Most Christians have a very superficial experience of God’s grace. And I would number myself among those most of the time. And speaking just about myself, I would say that my superficial experience of God’s grace is rooted in a superficial mourning for my sin.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Ephesians 3:17 which says, “And I pray that you being rooted and established in love may have power together with

all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. And to know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”

The other day I was meditating on that verse in my own devotions. And I felt the Holy Spirit prompt me with the thought, “Rich, would you like to know how deep, how long and wide and broad God’s love is for you? Would you like to be filled with the fullness of God? Then you need to make room in your life for God by considering how deep and long and wide and broad your sin is.” The measure of your experience of the grace of God in your life is often directly tied to the measure of your mourning for your sin.

Let me work this out for you. You say, “Well, I haven’t experienced much of God’s grace in my life recently, at least a real experience of break through with the Lord. I don’t feel much grace, much comfort from God.” Perhaps it has to do with the whole way you relate to your sin. Consider the depth and length and width of your sin.

Often times when we are dealing with a sin, we just look at the particular sinful action that we have committed. We confess that. “Lord, I confess that I just told a lie and I am sorry.” We don’t find a lot of grace there.

“I just committed adultery, forgive me.”

“Forgive me for losing my temper.”

Or consider the depth of your sin. By the depth I mean the motives behind what you did. Why do you do this? What are your reasons? So often our sins are like the leaves on a tree, but we don’t run the sin down the roots. What is it that is feeding this particular area of my life?

As you trace it down, you will see in you a sin nature, an awfulness, a brokenness in the very fiber of your being. That is why you do what you do. You don’t sin because of your parents. Your parents may have set you up to be more vulnerable to certain temptations, but you sin because there is a brokenness in you, a crack.

Paul understood the depth of his sin when he mournfully cries out, “Oh, wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death” in Romans 7.

Consider the depth of your sin. Consider the length of your sin. By that I mean not just your sin in this instance. But the pattern of this sin in your life. You want to mourn over your sin, run the thread of this sin back through your life’s history.

For example, if you are given to self-pity, ask yourself how long have I been like this? How many times have I used this to manipulate others? When did this particular sin start? How long has this sexual sin been in your life? How long have you always had to have your way or you would pout? Don’t just consider your sin in this instance, that you gossip. Consider how many people you gossip about.

Consider the breadth of your sin. That is not just its affect on you, but what is this sin doing to other people? How has it affected those closest to you? For example, if you have a bad temper, how has your temper affected your spouse?

Or your children? What has your anger done to your wife? Your kids? To your boyfriend or girlfriend?

You know, if you don't mourn because of the affect of sin on your own soul, perhaps you will begin to mourn as you think about how much damage you have created to others. How you have opened up the door in your home to Satan. The door in this church to the enemy.

Well, what about the width of you sin? Don't just consider your sin in isolation. Consider all the rest of your sins that are related to this. Sexual sin is often linked to a whole host of other sins—rebellion, unwillingness to wait on God for his time and his way, prayerlessness, a refusal to be vulnerable, a refusal to learn true intimacy, idolatry. Mourning plows up the ground of our hard hearts. It enables the seed of the Kingdom to get in there. And to the degree of the receipt of the comfort of the Lord is directly tied to the degree of our mourning.

Now, of course, we may mourn not only over our sin, but over the sins of others. In fact, the love of Christ in a Christian demands that we sometimes mourn over the sins of others. Of course, parents experience this when we grieve over the sins of our children and the hurt that our children's sins cause them. If you are a parent and you have had a child in rebellion, you know that their rebellion has created great pain in you. Not just because they have lashed out at you. But the pain goes deeper as you hate their lost potential. You hate them shutting themselves off from the joy that could be theirs, the success that you want for them. It is extremely painful to watch someone you love turn from God and walk in rebellion.

There is a classic Old Testament example of someone who mourns over the sins of others found in the book of Ezra in Ezra 9. I haven't the time to go through the text, but Ezra, as a priest, hears a report of the Israelites unfaithfulness to God, the fact that they have intermarried with people who don't share a common faith. Intermarriage in the scripture, that is across faith lines, a Christian who decides to marry a non-Christian, is always soundly condemned in the Bible. God knows that it will bring heartache. He wants to protect us. That is why the commandments are there, friends, because God loves us and can see what is down the road.

But Ezra is living in a day when the Israelites intermarried against God's will and he mourns over their sins. He sits on the ground and tears his clothes and pulls his beard out. They were very, very demonstrative back then in their mourning.

In the New Testament the classic example of someone who mourns over the sins of others is the Lord Jesus who wept over the city of Jerusalem. In Luke 19:41 it says, "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, 'If you, even you, had known on this day what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on the other because you didn't recognize the time of God's coming to you.'"

Jesus mourned over the Jewish people's rejection of the gift of the Messiah. It wasn't that he was hurt over their personal rejection of him. He grieved for what they lost, for what they missed out on. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn..."

I read an article recently written by a woman named MaryAnn Jennings, who is a professor of legal and ethical studies at Arizona State University. She is also a professional columnist. Not too many months ago she wrote a column in which she opposed same sex marriages. As a result of the column, she found that someone had slashed her tires. A letter writing campaign began against her in a very vindictive way. Letters were sent to her faculty chairman calling her a homophobic. Protest campaigns were mounted and she was screamed at by various people because of her column against same sex marriages.

One evening she said she was home putting her two little ones to bed. She began crying. As she thought about why she was crying, she said, "I mourn for a world that once respected God's values. I grieve for a world that was once tolerant of Christian viewpoints. My tears were those of a mother fearful for her children. If we have reached the point now where I am threatened because I raise questions, what will their world be like? What ridicule and punishment will they endure because of their values?"

Jesus said, "Blessed are they who mourn..." Why? Because it is good to feel pain? Because he doesn't like it when we laugh? Because Jesus is a sour-puss and doesn't want us to have a good time? The Book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible tells us that there is a time for laughter. Jesus likes parties. He went to a lot of them. The reason why we are blessed when we mourn is because we will be comforted.

Friends, I think a lot of us miss out on the wonderful grace of God because instead of waiting upon God to really comfort us, we immediately dull the pain of our mourning by medicating it with an escape. (new tape)...Christians are those who run from the truth. They can't face this pain of life so they create this God in heaven.

I think nothing is further from the truth, that Christians are people who run and hide from truth. My experience is that Christians are the only ones who will stare squarely at the truth about themselves and the world in all its awfulness, and not run into an escape, not medicate it away. I understand medicating pain. I have done that many times. And I have watched others medicate their grief and I have great sympathy for them.

My dad was in construction when I was growing up. He always worked with a thin older man who is now dead many years. The man's name was Kevin. We always called him Kevie. I remember even as a small boy that on a number of occasions my father would drive to a bar and physically (my dad was a large man) pick Kevie up from the bar and throw him in the back of our truck and drive Kevie home because Kevie would be roaring drunk. He would take him home and literally put him in bed. One time when I was about 8-years old, I asked my dad why Kevie drank so much. My dad said that a number of years before he came and he found his wife murdered and he couldn't handle the pain so he began to drink.

Some people can't handle the pain of their lack of love or affection growing up, so they turn to the arms of still yet another lover. Some people mediate their pain through overwork. Some people medicate their pain through food or addictive athletic training.

You know, friends, Jesus is saying something so precious here. He is saying that there is real comfort, that it is not necessary for us to continually dull our pain or drug ourselves until we don't feel the pain of life or of our own guilt. If we orient our hearts toward God and take our wounds to him, we will be comforted. But you know, there is an order to this thing. You must feel pain before you feel the comfort of the Lord. The way up toward God is first down into pain.

You say, "Prove it. Prove that what Jesus is saying is right."

Friends, if any of you have ever sat through a recovery group that was centered on Christ, you will watch people who are profoundly experiencing the comfort of the Lord. You go and sit through one session of a substance abuse recovery group or a sexual addicts recovery group or a support group for people who have cancer and it is centered on Christ; or a support group for people who have lost their children to AIDS, and what you will see is that as people refuse to medicate away their pain or turn from their addictions and bring this stuff to the light, they become the most genuine, the most healthy, the most secure people on the earth. Secure, healthy, whole people are often not found in Hollywood movie sets or corporate board rooms. Those folks are often addicted to psychotherapy. Secure, healthy, whole people are found wherever people allow themselves to mourn deeply and take their wounds to God.

I had the opportunity a few weeks ago to talk with a friend with whom I haven't spoken to in 20 years. He is a guy who actually closed the deal in terms of leading me to Jesus. Marlene, the woman who is now my wife, led me to the point of accepting Christ, but this guy actually closed the deal. We lost touch a couple of years after I received Christ when Marlene and I came down to Columbus for me to attend law school. But I found his number recently through another friend and gave him a call. We spent three hours on the phone bringing each other up to date on our lives and reminiscing. He said, "Rich, you know one of the things I remember about you shortly after you became a Christian was how much in love with Christ you were. I remember a conversation that you had with me one time when you were just 18. You said, 'Bob, if you had a free hour, what would you rather do? Would you rather read the Bible or pray?'"

Bob said, "I remember I was sitting there thinking that I would rather play basketball. But you were sincere. You were serious. I remember your answer."

I said, "Well, what did I say? That I would rather read the Bible?"

He said, "No, exactly the opposite. You said you would rather pray because when you prayed you felt the comfort of the Lord."

You know, when he said that it brought back a flood of memories of the first few months of meeting Jesus in my life 23 years ago now. That I had finally found someone that I could take all my pain to. That I didn't have to pretend to be macho or hard. I didn't have to withdraw like I always had in my life. That I finally found someone who could heal me and provide some comfort.

The way up is down. Jesus goes on and says, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

I must immediately share with you what meekness isn't, especially you men. We immediately stop listening when we hear the word "meek." Many of you were presented with "Jesus Christ, meek and mild..." a very effeminate, very drippy, very insipid version of Jesus. He was this thin, pale man who wouldn't step on an insect. Meekness is not weakness. The Greek word for meekness, "praos" has nothing to do with weakness. It has nothing to do with being quiet. Meekness is not the equivalent of being soft-spoken. A person who is shy or retiring. That is the way meekness is used today. He is a meek person, he doesn't say boo. She doesn't share her opinion. Anything is fine with me.

That is not meekness. Meekness, as well as all of the character qualities in the Beatitudes, are not natural temperamental traits. These things are not there by way of birth. I am not talking to you about natural and genetically endowed qualities. This is a spiritual matter. Praos, this quality, is put in a person by the Holy Spirit. The word is used in two senses in the Bible. In the Old Testament the word meek often refers to people who have no rights—the poor, those without any land, those who have no inheritance and no money. The person who is a servant and has to work for others and is easily exploited.

The Bible does teach that God is with those who have nowhere else to look but to God. Those folks are called the meek of the earth, the humble, the lowly. Psalm 149:4 says, "For the Lord takes delight in his people and he crowns the humble, the meek, with salvation." The Lord reveals himself as the God of those who have no rights in the Old Testament. He is the God of the slave people. Isaiah 29:19 says, "Once more the humble, the meek, will rejoice in the Lord. The needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel."

So, who are the meek? One usage in the Bible is that the meek are those who have no rights and no ability to enforce their rights. The person who has no options, no way out like the woman I talked about in India, Rachel, whose husband abandoned her for four years and gave her not a dime and wouldn't tell her when he was going to return or anything of their future plans. Foreclosed her for marrying? Of course, because she was married. And foreclosed her from having any children. She is one of the meek of the earth. The Bible promises that God will hear her prayers.

But there is another group of the meek that most of us in middle class America would fall into. That is those who by deliberate choice decide to not enforce the rights that they have. People who may be strong, but who choose in an instance not to exercise their strength, power or rights.

You know, we live in a time when everyone in our culture is aggressively asserting their rights. The presumption in America over the last 30 years is that individuals in order to be really happy and really fulfilled must be given hundreds of new rights and then aggressively assert those rights. In America in the 90's you have the right to be protected from your own extraordinary stupidity. You have been given that legal right. So, if you decide to mow your hedges with your self-starting lawn mower and you pick it up and you are mowing the tops of your hedges and the lawn mower somehow touches your shirt and drags a part of

your body into it, you sue the John Deere Company for not warning you to keep the mower on the ground. And if you chose to put a hot cup of coffee between your thighs in the car, drive off down the road and get burned, you sue McDonald's for making your coffee too hot.

Drug addicts have the right to have clean needles at government expense. And 6-year olds have the right to be free from the most innocent gestures of love and affection from other 6-year olds and first grade classes. And schools have such an expanded right to be drug free environments that they suspend 8th grade honor students for giving a Tylenol to another student. The non-religious in Norman, Utah have the right to eliminate even the most minor and most innocuous demonstrations of religion in public schools, like the singing of the song, Friends Forever, at a school graduation. They must insert their rights to not listen to a prayer that invokes the blessing of the Almighty.

The Supreme Court heard arguments this week about the right to Doctor assisted suicide. We have been sold a bill of goods in the last 30 years that says that life goes better when you aggressively assert all of your rights all of the time. And that those who don't aggressively assert their rights all the time are stupid and will end up as dishrags and losers.

Jesus says the way up is down. Who is telling you the truth? Do you always win by asserting your rights or is it possible to win in life by refusing to fight, by bearing offense, by refusing to retaliate, by holding your tongue, by not suing, by not being self-assertive and self-aggrandizing.

I would remind you that the Bible does not demand that we always give up our right to an offense. The Bible doesn't say that there is never a time to assert your rights. Those of you who are taking notes may want to jot down Acts 16:35-40 where Paul asserted his rights as a Roman citizen. Acts 22:25-29 where he again asserted his rights as a Roman citizen. Sometimes, it is absolutely appropriate and, in fact, the least self-willed thing that someone could do to stand up to an aggressor. For a wife to stand up to an abuser may be the least self-willed thing they do. The wife may be afraid, may be trained to cower before a dominating abuser, the least self-willed thing she could do, the most meek thing would be to stand up to him. Standing up to an alcoholic, to a domineering parent, to someone who has historically stepped on you may be the least self-willed thing you do, the most courageous.

I do not want to suggest to you today that meekness always requires laying down your rights. Some times it requires you to take them up. You see, the test of meekness is whether in any given situation you are willing to submit to the will of God. The meek person is the person who is submitted to God's will and asks what does God want me to do here. Sometimes God wants you to take up your rights. Sometimes God wants you to fight for justice, for truth. But sometimes, God doesn't want you to fight. And over against the American aggressive assertion of our rights, we find frequent biblical examples of people who obeyed God and seemed in the moment to let the ruthless win and to step on them and yet in the end ended up inheriting the earth.

Do the self-assertive always win? Do those who reach out for themselves and grab what they can grab now always win? And do those who let them do that always lose?

In some instances the way up is by going down. I want you to see Jesus' statements about the meek inheriting the earth practically working out by turning with me to Genesis 13. In Genesis 13 we read of a dispute that arises between Abraham and his nephew Lot. Abraham was the older man. He in that culture was entitled to respect, to the lion's share of everything. And his servants had a fight with Lot's servants. It says, "Now, Lot who was moving about with Abram [that was Abraham's name before God changed it] also had flocks and herds and tents. But the land could not support them while they stayed together for their possessions were so great. They were not able to stay together and quarreling arose between Abraham's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and the Perisites were also living in the land at that time."

Now Abram, like many Americans, could have simply said, "Get lost, Lot. I am your elder. I am going to assert my rights. I am going to demand my legal share of everything down to the last penny and coffee cup in the cabinet and the washcloth in the closet. I am going to make sure that I get what is mine." But Abram was a meek man. I would remind you that meekness is not weakness. In fact, in the next chapter Abraham leads a military campaign against four different kings and routes four kings in military battle. Meekness is not weakness. In fact, it requires more strength to take a punch than to give it. Proverbs 16:32 says, "Better a patient man than a warrior. A man who controls his temper than one who takes a city." It takes more strength to control your temper than to engage in a fight sometimes.

Let's see what Abram the meek man does. He says to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land [they were actually uncle and nephew, but he was saying we are close relations] before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I will go to the right. If you go to the right, I will go to the left."

See what a meek person does? A meek person lets someone get in front of them. Well, if you want to step in front of me in line, I will let you. Sometimes it is God's will for you to let someone else cut in front of you. Sometimes God does not want you to assert your rights. The meek person is the one who looks to God and submits to him.

Lot was the very opposite of that. He was a self-assertive man. It says, "Lot looked up and saw the whole plain of Jordan. It was well watered like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt toward Zor." [This was before the Lord chose to destroy Sodom and Gomorra.] So Lot chose for himself [and you can underline that he chose for himself] the whole plain of the Jordan. He set out toward the east. Abram lived in the land of Canaan while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tent near Sodom."

Lot said, "I am going to go after it. I am going to pick the part of the land that looks really good." He asserted himself and went after Sodom. Lot is the guy who is driving down the highway in his Miata laughing. He just doesn't see the curve up ahead. It turns out by his self-assertion, by his ruthless grasping, he

ended up losing it all. He lost everything. When God destroyed Sodom, everything that Lot owned was taken with it. In fact, Lot lost his own wife in the deal. He lost all of his belongings, everything he owned. He barely escaped with the clothes on his back and his two daughters.

Let's look what happened to the meek man, Abram. It says, "The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, 'Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south and east and west.'" The Lord lifted up his own eyes. Lot went after it himself. But Abram allowed God to guide him. The Lord told him to lift up his eyes and Abram was promised "all the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make an offering like the dust of the earth so that if anyone could count the dust then your offspring could be counted. Go walk through the length, breadth of the land for I am giving it to you."

Friends, do you know that if you listen to God and decide to renounce your rights in certain instances that God could give you and would give you so much more than you could ever grab for yourself. Do you know that if you choose not to retaliate because God has instructed you not to, that God will sometimes retaliate for you and do a much better job than you could ever do. Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge my friends, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written 'it is mine to avenge, I will repay,' says the Lord." By our aggressive assertion of our rights all the time, you know we don't leave any room for God. I have found over the years that if I choose not to respond in kind if people are gossiping about me and I choose not to ruin them and just leave room for God and pray that God would vindicate the truth and reveal the foundations, show what is really true, that God has been really faithful. Over the course of the last 20 years I can't tell you how many times I have watched the Lord humble me or someone else, I mean really humble them, because I have left room for God.

You don't have to go after your ex-spouse for all that it is worth. Leave room for God. You don't have to go after a co-worker, after a sibling, after someone who may have taken advantage of you in business—it is not always God's will for you to assert your rights. Sometimes God wants a chance to work on your behalf, let him.

The meek are not only those who give room for God's wrath, the meek are also those who give room for God's healing. We live in a time not only of the aggressive assertion of rights, but of the aggressive need to fix and straighten out everyone and every thing. Many people are addicted to their need to straighten someone else out, to fix what they perceive is wrong in everyone else. You see parents dominate and control their kids well into their kids' 30's and 40's. Spouses have to fix and clean up everything in their husbands and wives. Boyfriends and girlfriends try to wrestle each other into righteousness. Some Christians are guilt-ridden because they are not fixing everyone in their group, everyone in their church.

The meek person is a person who leaves room for God to straighten others out. It is not that there is no time to confront, no time to challenge, no time to bring truth—there is. But there is also a time to allow God to work. To pray in secret. To not impose yourself.

I want to finish with a little illustration. My family has been in the meat business. My grandfather, my uncle, my dad before he went into construction used to sell wholesale meat to nightclubs and restaurants. Meat has a certain grain to it. There is a marble to it. The bones, the sinews and grain of the meat will be respected by a good butcher. They cut the meat as it presents itself. A good butcher cuts the meat as it presents itself to them by following the grain.

My grandfather used to call people “hackers” who would just take meat and chop it up like they were cutting pieces of wood with a rotary saw. The hacker had no respect for the texture of the meat. Wood carvers respect the grain of the wood and follow the grain of the wood as it is presented to them by the creation of God.

Meek people are people who don't try to hack their way through life. They are interested in following the Holy Spirit's lead, strengthening the grain, allowing God to get his way in a certain situation. The winner in life's lottery is not the pusher, it is not the ruthless. Jesus was right. He knew what he was talking about. Sometimes you win by temporarily losing. And sometimes you go up by pushing the button that is marked down.