

Servant Leadership:

Practical Meekness

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Forerunner, "Ready Answer," July 2000

After completing traffic school last spring, I marveled at the many parallels that exist between developing [meekness](#) and defensive driving. The instructor said repeatedly, "Even though you have the right of way, don't insist on it." Many people who naively projected safety into a green light found themselves either in the emergency ward of a local hospital or worse yet, were found by grieving survivors in the morgue.

Meekness, a tolerant, yielding spirit, represents having the right of way but not insisting on it. [Jesus Christ](#) sets the tone of this approach in His discussion with the sons of Zebedee and the other disciples:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. ([Matthew 20:25-28](#))

Many have looked upon meekness, lowliness of spirit or the willingness to yield, with suspicion and perhaps even loathing. Meekness—or its common perception—may seem too much like weakness, wimpiness, or timidity.

Some have taken [Matthew 7:29](#) out of context to sanction a pompous, brittle, authoritarian approach, stating Jesus "taught . . . as one who had authority, and not as the scribes." Such people assume that this gives license to higher decibels and dogmatic manhandling of the audience, but they seriously misunderstand its intended meaning. Jesus could speak with authority because He possessed an unlimited reservoir of experience. He personified the Word of [God](#), while the scribes and Pharisees could only quibble about the bits

and pieces they had studied. Even though Jesus spoke with authority, the Gospels show His manner to be peaceable and yielding in most situations.

Small Pot Soon Hot

It is almost axiomatic that the one with the least reservoir of experience will appear as the most cocky and unyielding, while the one with a vast reservoir of experience—who has concluded that there are even vaster funds of knowledge yet to be learned—will appear as the more provisional and tolerant. In Speech 101, my professor referred to this process as "small pot soon hot." A reason why peer-group instruction sometimes fizzles is the cocky attitude displayed by the person who first "catches on" to some elementary step, lording it over the later bloomers. In the beginning stages of learning, knowledge has the tendency to "puff up" ([1 Corinthians 8:1](#)), but as one continues to grow in it, a quality of meekness replaces intolerant rigidity.

My son has taken piano lessons from two individuals, both full professors of music, both with enormous reservoirs of skill, technique and experience, as well as equal reserves of patience, gentleness, meekness, and encouragement. They have not taught him so much to play as they have helped him *learn* to play.

Students appreciate meekness in a teacher, just as customers appreciate a non-threatening, non-pushy sales representative. People do not naturally like to be "taught" or "sold on" anything. Through a meek spirit, a teacher can inspire and facilitate the human natural desire to learn by engaging the student's internal motivation. Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Criticism* suggests,

Men must be taught as if you taught them not, And
things unknown proposed as things forgot.

When Benjamin Franklin quotes these lines in his *Autobiography*, he refers to another of Pope's maxims, "To speak, tho' sure, with seeming diffidence."

Meekness Desired in Youth

The apostle Paul in his instructions to Timothy advocates a respectful, meek approach to members of his congregation: "Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, the younger as sisters, with all purity" ([I Timothy 5:1-2](#)). Paul tries to instill a balance in Timothy, pulling him away from the equally disgusting extremes of timidity and harshness, and pointing him toward the servant- or shepherd-style leadership advocated by Christ.

In a similar vein, another youthful individual, Elihu, utilizes a gentle, yielding, respectful, yet firm attitude toward Job, many years his elder and superior in social standing. In [Job 32:6](#), Elihu humbles himself, deferring to Job's age and experience, saying, "I am young in years, and you are very old." He shows proper respect to the other counselors, remarking, "Age should speak, and multitude of years should teach wisdom" (verse 7).

Elihu listens to Job's entire argument, giving him full, undivided attention before he makes any comments or suggestions. In [Job 33:6](#), Elihu acknowledges his common bond of frailty and mortality with Job: "Truly I am as your spokesman before God; I also have been formed out of clay." These reassuring words dismiss any thought of ulterior motives in the young man.

In an attitude of humility, Elihu entreats Job as a concerned son would approach a father. He demonstrates the principle that the apostle Paul later teaches the Galatians, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" ([Galatians 6:1](#)). Having a healthy estimate of our frailties and shortcomings will put us in the proper attitude for admonishing a brother.

Humility Before Honor

Some individuals used to arrogate to themselves the clever maxim, "We know and we know that we know." In certain restricted contexts, this stance may prove appropriate, but as a general approach to people, especially those new in the [faith](#), this "come on strong" approach may be a positive turn off. A more humble, shepherd-like, servant-like approach often proves more practical and effective.

Henry David Thoreau, quoting Confucius, suggests that "To know that we know what we know" is only half of the maxim. The entire proverb reads: "To know that we know what we know, and that we do not know what we do not know, that is real knowledge." An old Yiddish proverb reads, "As long as you understand your foolishness, you are smart."

Acquiring knowledge changes a person's approach and outlook. As one begins to learn, knowledge has the tendency to puff up, but as one steadily grows in knowledge, humility returns as one comes to the stark realization about how little he really knows. Perhaps this thought inspired Alexander Pope, who writes:

A little learning is a dang'rous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, And
drinking largely sobers us again.

Sir Francis Bacon expresses the concept another way: "A little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion."

Knowledge is dangerous if it is partial, if we take a part for the entire truth. Scriptural knowledge can similarly be dangerous if we drag a segment of Scripture from its context.

Byproduct of Trial

Meekness seems to come about as the result of intense trials and tests. Moses, trained in the arts and sciences of Egypt, did not attain his meek disposition until he spent forty years tending sheep with the Midianites. From this experience, besides his other humbling trials, he learned to "lead" rather than "drive."

Meekness in a shepherd and meekness in a teacher is just as needful as in the flock or in students. The servant-leader Moses learned meekness and obedience from what he suffered just as Jesus Christ learned obedience

through what He suffered so that He could empathize with His brethren ([Hebrews 5:8-9](#)). This humiliating experience served a significant purpose:

. . . that He might be a [merciful](#) and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted. ([Hebrews 2:17-18](#))

The meekness that accrues from sore trials and life experiences equips people with the sympathy, empathy, and sensitivity to help others enduring similar difficulties.

In this vein, the American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson expresses grave reservations about the young novice ministerial student, who may be long on homiletic training, but short on experience, especially those refining, fiery trials that develop quality character traits in a person ([I Peter 1:6-7](#)). He complains:

He had not one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. . . . [T]here not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history. The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought.

Patriarchal Examples of Meekness

As our spiritual forefathers matured through sore trials and life experiences, they learned that a tolerant yielding spirit proves more productive than asserting one's rights. When Abram's and Lot's herdsmen quarrel, Abram graciously suggests to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, or between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren" ([Genesis 13:8](#)). Instead of pulling rank on his impetuous young nephew, he graciously yields to Lot's choice, and for his meekness he receives a much larger blessing:

And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: "Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I will give to you and your descendants forever. ([Genesis 13:14-15](#))

Abraham's learned meekness and gentle spirit he bequeaths to his son [Isaac](#). In one episode, the Philistines repeatedly try to antagonize Isaac by filling up his wells with dirt, but the gentle patriarch chooses not to quarrel, instead removing to another place and making room for everyone (Genesis 26). After several such provocative encounters, "he moved from there and dug another well, and they did not quarrel over it. So he called its name Rehoboth, because he said, 'For now the LORD has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land'" ([Genesis 26:22](#)). Because of his yielding and meek behavior, God promised to bless him and increase his descendants as He had his father Abraham ([Genesis 26:24](#)).

In the same section in which Paul warns the Corinthians that exercising their rights may cause a weaker brother to stumble, he warns, "'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others" ([I Corinthians 10:23-24](#), NIV). Meekly yielding for the ultimate good does not mean weakness but instead strength, wisdom, and common-sense survival.

A friend once gave me a cartoon that vividly illustrates this. It pictures two cantankerous donkeys tethered together by a single rope, each straining to reach haystacks on opposite sides of the corral. Only when one donkey graciously yields do they both finally get enough to eat.

Jesus promises that "the meek . . . will inherit the earth" ([Matthew 5:5](#)). As our patriarchs Abraham and Isaac demonstrate, meekness represents having the right of way, but not insisting on it. We can begin applying this in little matters—like defensive driving—and it will soon migrate into areas of our lives—like interpersonal relationships—that really matter.

