

St. Gregory of Nyssa:

When one climbs up a ladder he sets foot on the first step, and from there goes on to the one above. Again, the second step carries the climber up to the third, and this to the following, and hence to the next. Thus the person who goes up always ascends from where he is to the step above until he reaches the top of his ascent. Now why do I begin like this? It seems to me that the Beatitudes are arranged in order like so many steps, so as to facilitate the ascent from one to the other. For if a man's mind has ascended to the first Beatitude, he will accept what follows as a necessary result of thought, even though the next clause seems to say something new beyond what had been said in the first.

... do not be surprised if the celestial regions are called "earth." For the Word, who came down to us because we were unable to rise up to Him, adapts Himself to the lowliness of our understanding. Therefore He communicates the Divine mysteries by words and names that are intelligible to use and uses such expressions as are within the range of human life and circumstances. ...

For it was impossible that those good things that are above the sense experience and knowledge of men should be revealed to them by their proper names. *For*, the Apostle says, *eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man.* (1 Cor. 2.9, citing Isa. 64.4) But we learn about the ineffable things according to the lowliness of the nature that is ours, so that the hoped-for beatitude may not altogether escape the grasp of our imagination. Therefore the word "earth", though it comes after that of "heaven" [in the First Beatitude], should not draw down your thought to the earth below; but if by the preceding Beatitude the Word has raised your minds to the heavenly hope, you should ask me about that earth which is not the inheritance of all, but only of those whose holy life has rendered them worthy of that promise. I think that the great David, guided by the Spirit, has also foreseen this, for the Divine Scripture declares him to have been meek and long-suffering above all his contemporaries. He grasped by faith the things for which we hope, when he said, *I believe to see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living.* (Ps. 26:13) For I do not suppose the prophet called this earth *the land of the living*, seeing that it brings forth only mortal things and again dissolved into itself everything that comes from it. But he meant the land of the living which death does not approach, where they do not tread the way of sinners, and where wickedness finds no foothold. That land, which the sower of tares cannot cut open with his plow of evil, and which therefore does not produce thistles and thorns; but the land of the water of refreshment and the green places, where springs up the fourfold fountain and the vine that is tended by the God of all creation, and all the other things the inspired book teaches us in metaphors.

If we are able to contemplate the transcendent land above the heavens, whose capital is the city of the King, of which, as the prophet says (cf. Ps. 86.3, 45.4, 47.2,3), glorious things are spoken, we shall probably no longer be surprised at the order in which the Beatitudes follow each other. For I do not think this earth here below could reasonably have been offered to the blissful hopes of those who, as the Apostle says, *would be taken up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so be always with the Lord.* (1 Thess. 4.16) Of what use can this

earth still be to those whose life is lived in hopes so sublime? For we shall *be taken up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so be always with the Lord.*

But let us consider the virtue which is meant to be rewarded by the inheritance of the land. He says: *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land.* What is meekness? And in what respect does the Word call meekness blessed? For if by this expression is meant everything that is done quietly and slowly, I do not think one should indiscriminately consider virtuous whatever is done *in meekness*. [The Greek word translated here as “meekness” has a secondary meaning of slowness or sedateness.] For example, among runners the “meek” laggard is not better than the one who races along, nor will a boxer who moves awkwardly take the crown from his opponent. In fact, speaking of our race for the prize of our heavenly vocation, Paul advises us to increase our speed; *So run*, he says, *that you may obtain.* (1 Cor. 9.24) For he himself came to seize what was before him by an increasingly fast movement, forgetting the things he had left behind. He was indeed an agile fighter and watched closely his opponent’s assault. Well-armed and secure in his step, he did not direct the weapon in his hand against some empty shadow, but he attacked his adversary in his vital parts by inflicting blows on his own body.

Would you like to know Paul’s method of fighting? Look at the wounds of his opponent, look at the bruises and marks he left on his defeated enemy. You know very well the adversary who fights through the flesh, and whom he chastises by his boxing skill. (cf. 1 Cor. 9.27) He scratches him with the nails of continence, he mortifies his limbs by hunger and thirst, by cold and nakedness, he inflicts on him the marks of the Lord. (cf. Gal. 6.17) He defeats him in the race and leaves him behind, so that no shadow should be thrown across his eyes by the enemy running in front of him. Thus Paul is a swift and nimble fighter, David *enlarges his steps* in pursuit of his enemy (cf. Ps. 17.37 f.), the Bridegroom in the Canticle is likened to a roe because of his speed, *leaping upon the mountains and skipping over the hills* (cf. Cant. 2.9, 8); and there are many other sayings placing speed of movement above the slowness that goes with meekness. Why then does the Word here call meekness a blessed and acceptable quality? For He says: *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land.* By this He surely means the land that is fruitful in good things, where the tree of life waves its leaves, which is watered by the fountains of spiritual graces. It is the land where sprouts the true vine, and its husbandman, we are told, is the Father of the Lord. (cf. John 15.1)

Now what the Word wants to make clear seems something like this. There is a great tendency towards evil in nature, which is quick to turn towards the worse. For example, heavy bodies never move upwards; but if they are flung down from a high mountain ridge, their own weight accelerates the movement, so that they are borne downwards with such force that their speed defies description. Since, therefore, in these circumstances speed is something dangerous, the concept of its opposite would be called blessed. Now the habit that gives way to such downward impulses only slowly and with difficulty is called meekness. For just as fire, whose nature tends always to move upwards, does not move in the opposite direction, so also virtue is quick to tend to the things above without slackening its speed, whereas it is hampered in its movement towards the opposite. Hence, as our nature is very quick to turn towards evil, slowness and quiet in these matters are called

blessed. For calm in such things proves the presence of the upward movement.

Perhaps we had better make our meaning clear by an example from life. Everyman is capable of moving his free will in two directions; according to what seems good to him he may be turning towards temperance on the one hand, or towards license on the other. Now what is said to be the form of virtue or vice in a part, is to be understood to be such also as regards the whole. For man's character is divided into opposite impulses. Wrath is opposed to gentleness, arrogance to modesty; envy to wishing people well, and hate to a loving and peaceable disposition. Human life is, indeed, material, and the passions are concerned with matter; each one of them is possessed by the keen and irrepressible desire for the satisfaction of its will, for matter is heavy and tends downwards. Therefore the Lord calls blessed not those who live in complete isolation from the passions; for it is impossible to secure a perfectly immaterial and passionless mode of life within the confines of a material existence. But He calls meekness a standard of virtue attainable in the life of the flesh, and He says that meekness suffices for beatitude. He does not set up complete absence of passion as a law for human nature; for a just lawgiver could not in fairness command things that nature does not permit. This would be somewhat like making water animals live in the air, or, contrariwise, those that live in the air take to the water. Not so; for a law must be suited to the proper natural capacity.

Hence the Beatitude commands moderation and meekness, but not complete absence of passion; for the latter is outside the scope of nature, whereas the former can be achieved by virtue. If, therefore, the Beatitude ordered man to be unmoved by desires, the blessing would be quite useless for life. Indeed, who could attain to such a state while still united to flesh and blood? But actually He does not say a man is to be condemned if he chances to desire something, but only if of set purpose he lets himself be drawn to passion. For the weakness inherent in our nature frequently causes such desires to arise against our will; it is the work of virtue not to let ourselves be carried away by the impulse of passion as by a torrent, but to resist such leanings manfully and to defeat passion by reason.

Blessed, therefore, are those who are not easily turned towards the passionate movements of the soul, but who are steadied by reason. For the reasoning power restrains the desires like a rein and does not suffer the soul to be carried away to unruliness. How blessed is meekness can best be seen with regard to the passion of wrath. When some word or deed or suspicion causing annoyance has roused this disease, then the blood boils round the heart, and the soul rises up for vengeance. As in pagan fables some drugged drink changes human nature into animal form, so a man is sometimes seen to be changed by wrath into a boar, or dog, or panther, or some other wild animal. His eyes become bloodshot; his hair stands on end and bristles; his voice becomes harsh and his words sharp. His tongue grows numb with passion and refuses to obey the desires of his mind. His lips grow stiff; and unable to articulate a word, they can no longer keep the spittle produced by passion inside the mouth, but dribble froth disgustingly when they try to speak. Hands and feet behave in a similar way, and such is the attitude of the whole body, every limb being affected by this passion.

Though a man might get into such a state—yet if he be guided by the Beatitude, he will

appease the disease through reason, cultivating a calm expression and a gentle voice, like a physician who cures the unseemly behavior of a madman by his art. If you compare the two by contrast, would you not also say that the man who behaves like a brute is pitiable and disgusting, but that the meek man, who does not lose his poise on account of his neighbor's perversity, is to be called blessed?

It is clear that the Word has especially this passion in mind, because He bids us be meek immediately after enjoining humility. For it seems that one closely follows the other, and well-established humility is, as it were, the mother of the habit of meekness. If you free a character from pride, the passion of wrath has no chance of springing up. If men are subject to anger, this disease is caused by insult and dishonor. But insult does not affect a man trained in humility. For if he has purged his mind from human deceit, he will look at the lowliness of the nature allotted to him. He will consider the beginning of his existence as well as the end to which hastens this transitory life. He will realize the filth connected with the flesh and the incompleteness of a nature that is not self-sufficient in regard to its sustenance, but whose deficiency has to be supplied by the abundance of the irrational creatures. He will, moreover, meditate on all the miseries, misfortunes, and manifold forms of disease to which human life is subject, from which no one's nature is altogether immune.

If a man sees these things clearly with the purified eye of the soul, he will not easily be annoyed by the absence of honors. On the contrary, if honor is given to him for some reason or other by his neighbor, he will think it acquired under false pretenses, since there is in our nature nothing connected with honor, save only what regards the soul; and its honor does not consist in the things covered after the manner of this world. For to boast of riches or to be proud of one's family, to have regard to fame and to think oneself above one's neighbor, all these things in which human honor consists are but destruction and shame to the honor of the soul. Therefore no right-thinking man should choose to defile the purity of his soul with such a thing. To be of this mind is precisely to be habitually profoundly humble, for if humility is well established, wrath will find no entrance into the soul. And if wrath is absent, life will be in a settled state of peace. Now this is nothing else but meekness, the end of which is beatitude and the inheritance of the heavenly country in Christ Jesus, to whom be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.