

Some Words About...

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Praus (pious)

The NRSV translates *praus* as “humble” in Matthew 11:29 and 21:5, as “meek” in Matthew 5:5, and as “gentle” in 1 Peter 3:4. There is no English word which expresses the deliberately restrained authority that *praus* does, the implication that one has the power but does not use it. The New Testament — and most of the Septuagint — uses of *praus* imply that the power is godly, so “pious” is probably the closest we can get to expressing the Greek.

The Septuagint

Psalm 25:9 [24:9, Septuagint] says that the Lord “leads the pious in what is right, and teaches the pious his ways.” Psalm 37:11 [36:11] is the famous statement that “the pious shall inherit the earth.” Psalm 149:4 [148:4] says the Lord “adorns the pious with victory.” In general the Psalms describe the pious as those who are receptive to the will of God and whom God supports.

The New Testament

Matthew 5:5, “Blessed are the pious, for they shall inherit the earth,” embodies the idea that accepting God’s gifts, enjoying them, and employing them according to the divine intention makes the pious the proprietors of creation. To destroy or misuse God’s gifts is to lose our inheritance. Those who receive God’s gifts thankfully, delight in them properly, and apply them to God’s glory make the earth their own because they celebrate it as God’s surprisingly beautiful largesse.

Matthew 11:29, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am pious and tender hearted,” is one of the few instances in the synoptic Gospels when Jesus gives a description of himself. And it is given as part of an invitation to involvement and enlightenment. Because the invitation depicts person-to-person involvement, a clarification of the inviter’s nature is extended. Because the involvement is both restrictive and enriching, Jesus sets the bar high by indicating that following him will constitute work in harness, and he specifies that the environment is both God-directed and sympathetic.

An understanding of Matthew 21:5 (see Zechariah 9:9), “your king is coming to you pious and riding on a donkey, even on a colt the foal of a donkey,” is complemented by John 12:13-15, which indicates that the crowd was waving palms, shouting “Hosannah! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord — the king of Israel,” and welcoming him as king, and that in response Jesus found a young donkey and rode it into the city. The order is significant. First the crowd hailed Jesus as king, and then, as a symbolic gesture showing what sort of king he was, Jesus rode the donkey. The contrast to conquerors of that day riding on their war horses was clear. And the connection with the prophecy of Zechariah was obvious.

The potential is there for each Christian to be like Jesus, pious and tenderhearted. But the danger is there, too — for the Christian to mistake restraint for weakness or to substitute human vigor for the power of God.

The author of 1 Peter 3:4 wrote several rules covering situations among Christians of his day to make things easier for everyone concerned. He has one focus on the non-Christian society that was predominant (2:12) and another focus on the general culture of the day (2:13). Among the specific suggestions are those addressed to wives. He urges them, among other things, to avoid ornamentation but to adorn themselves with an “inner spirit pious and gentle.” His world was different from that of the author of Song of Solomon (1:10-11). Times change. Still, a pious and gentle spirit is attractive.

Today

In New Testament terms, a pious person is one receptive to God's power and who channels that power to accomplish God's will. Such individuals do not use their power aggressively, but their nonviolent approach displays forces of divine energy in a godly way for godly intentions. They may not be extolled by the popular media. They may not be aware of the manifold effects of the God-power channeled through them. But there were in the twentieth century some who became beacons in the darkness of a selfish, violent, and evil world. Such were Martin Niemöller, Dag Hammarskjöld, Mother Teresa, Corydon Wassell, Booker T. Washington, and Toyohiko Kagawa.

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