

# THE PILLAR OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

Second Olivet Missionary Baptist Church

Wednesday, December 13, 2017

Pastor Cyrus L. Thornton

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## Blessed Are the Humble

True spirituality, which is always characterized by biblical faith and obedience, is also accompanied by the attitude of humility. This attitude is at the very center of the Christian life. It is the foundation of all graces, and yet so much of what passes for Christianity these days emphasizes pride and self-esteem, which were also prominent in the Judaism of Jesus' day. The Jews, notably the scribes and Pharisees, paraded their external religion before others and expected to receive flattering praise in return. Jesus exposed that hypocrisy when He taught the twelve and other disciples the following:

*They [the religious leaders] do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.*

—[Matt. 23:5-12](#)

### JESUS' TEACHING ON HUMILITY

The Jewish leaders obviously had not heeded the Lord's earlier instruction against spiritual pride, which He took aim at in the opening sentences of the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for

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righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” ([Matt. 5:3–6](#)). Each of those godly attitudes, with its accompanying promise, describes people who are in the kingdom of God. They identify those people who have comfort in all the important issues of life and who can look forward to someday inheriting the earth in its ultimate form—the glories of the new heaven and the new earth. And each Beatitude is descriptive of a facet of humility.

## *Poverty of Spirit*

Christ begins the Sermon with the phrase, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” “Poor” is from the Greek *ptochos*, which means one who is so poor he has to beg. It was used specifically of beggars who had no work skill or were too disabled to work. Such poor people were financially bankrupt, utterly destitute, and without any means of support.

The kingdom of God belongs to the spiritually destitute. All who are genuinely saved have realized their own spiritual bankruptcy; thus they knew they could not enter based on any worth of their own. In the final analysis, the kingdom belongs to everyone who has been, like the tax collector in Jesus’ parable, “even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’” ([Luke 18:13](#)).

By contrast, membership in the kingdom of God does not belong to those who are counting on their baptism, their church upbringing, or their Christian heritage. Kingdom membership also does not belong to people who are counting solely on some date when they “made a decision for Christ” or went forward at the end of a service. Likewise, those who take pride in conformity to all the external forms of their church tradition, who give regularly to various ministries, and who are always busy with religious activities cannot presume to have automatic membership in the kingdom. The only ones who can claim such assurance are those who have humbly cast themselves on God’s mercy, were cleansed of their sins, and therefore “went down to [their] house justified,” as Jesus described the tax collector in [Luke 18:14](#).

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## *Spiritual Mourning*

People who understand and are dealing with their spiritual bankruptcy also “mourn” over their sin. This is not the improper mourning that displays sorrow over sinful plans that are frustrated ([2 Sam. 13:2](#)) or that manifests a prolonged, depressed sorrow or an abnormal amount of grief due to misguided loyalties and affections ([2 Sam. 18:33—19:6](#)). That kind of mourning is wrong and often is related to selfish guilt, unfaithfulness, and a sinful lack of trust in the Lord.

The mourning Jesus speaks of in [Matthew 5:4](#) is not even the same as the legitimate kind, which we all display from time to time as a normal part of life, such as when a loved one dies ([Gen. 23:2](#)). Neither is it the kind of mourning that believers do when they are discouraged in ministry ([2 Tim. 1:3–4](#)), when they are grieved over another’s sins ([Jer. 9:1](#)), when they are concerned for the spiritual welfare of other Christians ([Acts 20:31, 37–38](#)), or when they are distressed about the difficulties of a relative or friend ([Mark 9:24](#)).

Jesus truly knows about all those rightful sorrows of believers, and He will provide them all the help they need to cope with trials; but that is not the issue in [Matthew 5](#). In verse [4](#) He is referring to a godly mourning that only those who are earnestly seeking Him for salvation or those who already know Him can experience. Paul commended the Corinthians for such godly mourning (sorrow): “For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you” ([2 Cor. 7:10–11](#)).

Of the nine different Greek terms used in the New Testament for *sorrow*, the one translated “mourn” in [Matthew 5:4](#) and elsewhere represents the strongest feelings and the most heartfelt grief (cf. [Mark 16:10](#); [Rev. 18:11, 15](#); and [Gen. 37:34](#) [Greek Old Testament]). It further conveys the concept of deep inward agony, sometimes accompanied by outward weeping and wailing. When David mourned over his sin and confessed it, he declared, “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!” ([Ps. 32:1–2](#)).

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In [Matthew 5:4](#), Jesus uses the present participle *penthountes*, indicating continuous action. Faithful and mature believers will have a constant, lifelong attitude of mourning or brokenness over sin, which will allow them to see more and more of God's love and mercy and less and less of their own pride. The true expression of this attitude (it will not wallow in self-pity or false humility) does not focus on the person and his or her sin, but humbly and happily looks to God, who alone can forgive iniquity. It is the attitude Paul expressed in [Romans 7](#) as he described his ongoing battle with sin, which he concluded by saying, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (vv. [24–25](#)).

If we continually mourn over sin, we will be continually comforted. Although we can know this comfort in the present ([Matt. 11:28](#); [2 Thess. 2:16](#)), it will be complete only in the glory of heaven, where God "shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" ([Rev. 21:4](#)).

## ***Gentleness***

The attitude of gentleness ([Matt. 5:5](#)), according to our Lord's divine wisdom, fits next in the way He logically presents the Beatitudes. Poverty of spirit leads us to turn away from our sinful selves and mourn because of our unrighteousness. Then gentleness, which is also a product of our humility, will cause us to seek God's righteousness.

The Greek word (*praos*), rendered "gentle" in verse [5](#), essentially means "mild" or "soft" and sometimes described a soothing medicine or a soft breeze. It also described the temperament of animals whose naturally wild spirits had been broken to make them useful as work animals. In humans it defined an attitude that was meek, submissive, quiet, and tenderhearted. Though Jesus, during His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, was hailed as the King of the Jews, Matthew also says He was "gentle, and mounted upon a donkey" ([21:5](#)).

Gentleness has always been God's will for His people. [Job 5:11](#) says that God "sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety." Moses is described as being "very

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humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth” ([Num. 12:3](#)). And David, the man after God’s own heart, wrote, “He [the Lord] leads the humble in justice, and He teaches the humble His way” ([Ps. 25:9](#)).

Gentleness is also stressed throughout the New Testament. In addition to Jesus’ teaching on it, Paul had much to say. The apostle urged the Ephesian believers to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love” ([Eph. 4:1–2](#)). He instructed Titus to remind his people “to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men” ([Titus 3:1–2](#)).

In English, the word *gentleness* (and especially its older synonym *meekness*) may often connote weakness, but that is a misunderstanding of the scriptural meaning. Gentleness is power placed under control, as the writer of Proverbs says: “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city” ([16:32](#)). In contrast, the individual who is not gentle is likened to “a city that is broken into and without walls” ([Prov. 25:28](#)). Gentleness always uses its resources appropriately, unlike the out-of-control emotions that so often are destructive and have no place in the life of the believer.

Gentleness also should not be equated with cowardice, lack of conviction, or mere human niceness. Instead, it is a virtue that draws courage, strength, conviction, and a good disposition from God, not from self-centered human resources. Gentleness was characteristic of our Lord Jesus Christ, who always defended God’s glory and ultimately gave Himself in sacrifice for others (see [1 Pet. 2:21–24](#)). Although He did not lash back when criticized, slandered, or treated unjustly, Jesus responded fittingly and firmly when God’s honor was profaned or His truth was perverted or neglected. He twice cleansed the Temple by force ([John 2:14–16](#); [Matt. 21:12–17](#)), and He repeatedly and fearlessly denounced the hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leaders ([Matt. 23:13–36](#); [Mark 12:13–40](#); [John 8:12–59](#); [9:39–41](#)).

Like Christ, the gentle person does not defend himself. That’s because he has died to self and therefore does not worry about insult, material loss, or even personal injury. The believer who has



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gentleness knows that in himself he does not deserve defending and that in the long run all his possessions are not worth fighting for. In that sense, gentleness is the opposite of violence and vengeance.

The result of gentleness, according to Jesus, is that those who have it “shall inherit the earth” ([Matt. 5:5](#)). God will someday reclaim His earthly domain, which was marred by the Fall, and believers will rule that domain with Him. Therefore those who are gentle—all true Christians—can trust completely in Jesus’ promise. Our Lord’s use of the emphatic Greek pronoun *autos* indicates that *only* the gentle will inherit the earth with Him.

The Greek term for “inherit” (*kleronomeo*) means “to receive one’s allotted portion or rightful inheritance.” It is a promise, along with [Psalm 37:11](#), that in spite of the present prosperity of many unbelievers and the suffering that many believers now endure, a time of reckoning is coming. The unbeliever (unless he repents and believes) will be judged, and the believer will inherit the blessing God has promised.

The meting out of judgment and the granting of blessing is in God’s sovereign hands and will be accomplished precisely in His time and according to His will. In the meantime, His children are to live in faith and obedience, with gentleness, knowing that then they “shall inherit the earth.”

## ***Spiritual Hunger and Thirst***

The fourth Beatitude—“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” ([Matt. 5:6](#))—is more positive and flows from the previous three. When someone dies to himself, mourns over his sinfulness, and turns over his power to God’s control, he will receive a strong desire for righteousness and an intense longing for more of what God has.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones defines the importance of [Matthew 5:6](#):

*This Beatitude ... is a statement to which all the others lead. It is the logical conclusion to which they come, and it is something for which we should all be profoundly thankful and grateful to God. I do not know of a better test that anyone can apply to himself or herself*

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*in this whole matter of the Christian profession than a verse like this. If this verse is to you one of the most blessed statements of the whole Scripture, you can be quite certain you are a Christian. If it is not, then you had better examine the foundations again. (Studies in the Sermon on the Mount [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971], 1:73–74)*

Even though genuine believers still struggle with unredeemed flesh (cf. [Rom. 8:23](#)), they desire to know and obey more and more of God's truth. This is evident from David's confession: "O how I love Thy law" ([Ps. 119:97](#)). The apostle Paul testifies to the same passion for righteousness: "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man" ([Rom. 7:22](#)).

The following true story from World War I is an excellent illustration of the intense meaning Jesus' phrase "hunger and thirst" conveys. When Palestine was liberated, a combined force of troops from the British Empire closely pursued the retreating Turks across the desert. The Allied soldiers soon outdistanced their water-carrying camel train as they passed Beersheba and pushed northward. Before long the men ran out of water and began feeling the ill effects. Their mouths dried up, and their lips swelled and became purple. They suffered headaches, dizziness, and faintness. Their bloodshot and bleary eyes saw mirages. In desperation they all realized they had to reach the wells at Sheriah by nightfall to avoid suffering thousands of fatalities. Hundreds had already died of thirst; so the others fought hard and drove the Turkish forces from Sheriah.

After the battle, the strongest British troops were required to stand at attention near the giant stone cisterns as water was distributed to the wounded and those about to go on guard duty. While the needy refreshed themselves, the other men were not more than twenty feet from thousands of gallons of water. They had agonized for many days to reach all that fresh water, and yet they were forced to wait an additional four hours before enjoying it.

One of the officers who witnessed that march reportedly made this spiritual application: "I believe that we all learned our first real Bible lesson on the march from Beersheba to Sheriah Wells. If such were our thirst for God, for righteousness and for His will in our lives, a consuming, all-embracing, preoccupying desire, how rich in the fruit of the Spirit would we be?" (E.M. Blaiklock, "Water," *Eternity* [August 1966], 27).

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That illustration shows that Jesus used the most powerful natural impulses and longings to represent how we as believers should deeply desire righteousness. “Hunger” and “thirst” are both present participles, signifying a continuous longing and seeking. If we know Christ, we will continually yearn after holiness, just as we longed to know Him at our salvation. Sinlessness and complete likeness to the Lord do not occur until we reach heaven; therefore, we always need to be, and should never stop, hungering for greater and greater growth in sanctification. This is an attitude we will have every day (cf. [Luke 6:21](#)) if we are truly humble. Paul prayed that the Philippians’ “love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ” ([Phil. 1:9–10](#)).

Another feature of spiritual hunger is that its object is all-encompassing. That is clearly seen in the grammar of [Matthew 5:6](#). Jesus uses the Greek accusative genitive for “righteousness,” which makes it the unqualified, complete object of “hunger and thirst.” Those who truly long for righteousness will be longing for all the righteousness there is (cf. [5:48](#); [1 Pet. 1:15–16](#)).

Our Lord also uses the Greek definite article (not included in most English translations) before “righteousness,” which denotes a special kind of righteousness—the righteousness—that which is true and comes only from God, because it actually resides in Him.

Finally, the attitude of spiritual hunger is unconditional. If we have such hunger, we will seek and accept God’s righteousness no matter how He provides it, and we will obey His commands no matter how challenging or difficult they may be. We will not be like the rich young ruler ([Mark 10:17–22](#)) who hungered for worldly things more than for the things of God. His self-centered conditions for God’s blessings prevented him from receiving them. The spiritually hungry want only Christ and His kingdom (cf. [Ps. 119:20](#); [Isa. 26:9](#))—even if that means not having some of the material riches that people in the world have.

The attitudes Jesus taught in [Matthew 5:3–6](#) are to characterize believers throughout their entire earthly lives. If you’re a Christian, you don’t become more worthy of salvation or more worthy of God’s goodness than when you first entered the kingdom. You still sin, and it is still



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God's grace that sustains you. Therefore, there is never a time or a place for selfish pride to be exercised in your life. Whatever godly traits and noble works may be manifest in you are the work of the Lord, not of your own ingenuity or innate goodness. That's why Peter exhorts us in [1 Peter 5:5-6](#), "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time."

## PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH

There is no doubt that God wants believers to have humility. But because of their remaining sinfulness, God sometimes does whatever is necessary to humble them. Even the apostle Paul experienced God's humbling work in the midst of his ministry, not just at his conversion on the Damascus road:

*I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me. And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*

—[2 Cor. 12:1-9](#)

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Even though he speaks rather obliquely in verse [2](#) of “a man in Christ,” the context makes it obvious that Paul is referring to himself. He mentions an extraordinary, supernatural experience he had fourteen years earlier (probably sometime between his return to Tarsus from Jerusalem [[Acts 9:30](#)] and the beginning of His missionary journeys [[Acts 13:1–3](#)]), the details and reality of which he did not understand and could not fully explain. He was not sure if he was taken to heaven bodily, or if his spirit was somehow temporarily translated out of his body. But God knows how it happened, and that’s what matters.

Whatever the details, Paul was wondrously transported to “the third heaven” (the same place as “Paradise”), the abode of God Almighty and the place of His throne. Despite incomplete and imprecise understanding concerning how things happened, Paul repeated, as if for emphasis, his assertion that he truly had been taken to heaven. He was certain the event did occur, and he even heard words of supernatural origin, spoken to him alone. So this experience was unique to Paul, no matter what many charismatics or mystics may claim today. The words he heard were also special—“inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (v. [4](#)), and beyond what the text says, we cannot know what they were.

But the various unknowns of Paul’s account are beside the point. His real purpose in writing about his incredible experience is to relate what he learned about humility. The apostle knew he had not been granted a special trip to heaven because he was so spiritual and deserved the privilege. Although a part of him wanted to celebrate and rejoice at the memory of such a journey, he was more inclined to look back and rejoice in his weakness.

This incident and several other visions and revelations (e.g., [Acts 9:3–18](#); [16:9–10](#); [27:23–24](#); [Gal. 1:12](#); [2:2](#); [Eph. 3:3](#)) could easily have caused the apostle to be elevated with pride and feelings of superiority. That’s why [2 Corinthians 12:7](#) says, “For this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself!”

Paul writes metaphorically of a “thorn,” but the agent of his humility is better likened to a sharp stake that could be driven right through his otherwise proud flesh. It was not some small thing like

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a thorn on a rosebush, but something significant enough to truly humble him. In fact, it was a messenger from Satan whom God allowed to keep Paul from being puffed up with pride. And it's clear this person was allowed by God to afflict Paul because the apostle to no avail asked the Lord three times to remove the thorn.

I believe this particular reference to a demon-possessed or satanically inspired person was to the ringleader of the Corinthian false teachers who were conspiring against Paul and devouring the church at Corinth. Undoubtedly, Paul did not like being backed against the wall by his opponents at Corinth and quite likely prayed that God would destroy them, even as David prayed in the imprecatory psalms regarding his enemies. But God wanted to use the leader of Paul's foes as an instrument to humble him. The Lord was willing, as He often is, to use whatever extremity necessary to humble one of His servants, even if it meant sending a messenger from Satan to plague Paul, allowing divisions in the Corinthian church to challenge him, or permitting his enemies at Corinth to directly test him by maligning his character. To God it is crucial that believers understand and embrace the attitude of humility.

[Second Corinthians 12:9](#) further explains just how important humility is for us who know Christ: "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me." God leveled Paul and taught him that when he was at the end of himself and had nothing, then he was most usable in ministry. The apostle thus came to realize that spiritual power is directly related to humility and brokenness. He searched his heart, let the Lord's humbling work go forward, and learned to embrace adversity—false accusations, malicious criticisms and character attacks, and much misrepresentation of his motives. Those are the same things we often must do if we would display a genuine attitude of humility.

## THE MARKS OF THE HUMBLE PERSON

Some of the truest marks of the humble Christian are summarized in Paul's exhortation to the Philippians: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of

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you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” ([2:3-4](#)).

The first basic mark of the humble person is that he sees his own sin as worse than others’. Paul himself was a perfect example of this attitude: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” ([1 Tim. 1:15](#)). When it’s *our* sins that most grieve and offend us and are the ones we most want to avoid, then we demonstrate a real measure of humility.

A second mark of the humble person is that he or she is not self-centered ([Phil. 2:4](#)). Selfless people are more concerned with the lives of others, including their enterprises, their successes and failures, their blessings and disappointments, and their prosperity or poverty. Their own interests, privileges, popularity, achievements, or reputations are secondary when compared to the needs of others.

Of course, the Lord Jesus had the supreme attitude of selflessness, as expressed in [Philippians 2:5-8](#):

*Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Christ was perfectly willing to set aside His divine privileges and be separated from the Father to endure inexplicable, incomprehensible agony so that we might be saved. This marvelous and familiar passage underscores the magnitude of our Lord and Savior’s humility on our behalf. He condescended to our human level—even taking on the role of a bond-servant—so that in His sacrificial death He could fulfill God’s plan of redemption for all of us who have faith and obedience in Him.

The attitude of humility comes full circle—back to Jesus Christ and what He humbly did for spiritually bankrupt, completely unworthy sinners. That brings us back to what our attitude must



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be if we would reap the benefits of His atoning work and enter His kingdom. It's the attitude Jesus urged the disciples to have:

*At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And He called a child to Himself and set him in their midst, and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

—[Matt. 18:1-4](#)

Right in the midst of the disciples' prideful debate among themselves about who would be greatest in the kingdom, Jesus used a little child to illustrate humility. A child is totally dependent, and that's the attitude we must bring as we seek entrance into God's kingdom. We must enter with childlike faith and obedience, and we must live every day of the Christian life with an attitude of childlike humility. As Augustus Toplady wrote in the third stanza of his great hymn "Rock of Ages":

*Nothing in my hand I bring,*

*Simply to thy cross I cling;*

*Naked, come to thee for dress,*

*Helpless, look to thee for grace.*

