

Spiritually Grown and Sustainable: Gentleness

John 4:4-26

1 Peter 1:13-25

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This morning's trait of gentleness may just be the most counter-cultural of all the traits of the fruit of the Spirit. The Greek word we see as "gentleness" in the traits of the fruit of the Spirit is also translated in other places as "meek" or "meekness." "Blessed are the meek," said Jesus, "for they shall inherit the earth."¹ That is a teaching that makes us feel uncomfortable, because nobody wants to be known as "meek," at least not outside the Christian sphere of life. You might as well say, "blessed are the doormats," or "blessed are those who let everyone walk all over them," because that's how we view meekness.

Let's be honest: You're not going to see commercials or hear slogans like, "Got Meek?", or "America Runs on Meekness" or "The few, the proud, the meek."

I'd have to say that meekness and gentleness are particularly offensive to the traditional stereotypical notion of manhood or masculinity. Men have to be rough, tough. We have a word for gentle and meek men – we call them wimps. "Macho, macho man. I gotta be a macho man," sang the Village People back in the late 1970s. When you have a drill sergeant or a coach spitting in someone's face, "Be a man!" you don't get the idea that they have meekness or gentleness in mind.

This isn't something new. Even the ancients didn't appreciate meekness or gentleness, at least not for their leaders or people in authority. Aristotle likened meekness as somewhere between a bad temper and spineless incompetence, merely a compromise between two undesirable traits. Meekness, it seems, was equated with weakness. Just as it is today.

As usual, the problem isn't so much with real meekness, as it is with our misunderstanding of what real meekness is in the biblical sense. The notion of meekness or gentleness which Jesus describes as "blessed", and which Paul includes in the fruit of the Spirit, is that of power under control. A correct understanding of what it means to be gentle in the commendatory sense found in the Bible is more along the lines of humble restraint, a willful holding-back of power.

A long time ago someone I heard someone liken meekness-gentleness to

¹ Matthew 5:5

a wild stallion brought under control with a bit inserted between its upper and lower jaws. Without the bit in its mouth, the stallion is hard to direct, if at all possible; but with the bit in its mouth, the stallion can be steered to the left or the right, or made to come to a complete stop, with a mere tug on the reins. Or Billy Graham likens meekness-gentleness to the power of a river harnessed to make electricity. "A river under control can be used to generate power," he says. "A fire under control can heat a home. Meekness, [gentleness], is power, strength, spirit, and wildness under control."²

Gentleness is a strong hand, with a soft touch. Gentleness approaches other people's weakness with compassionate tenderness. "A gentle person still speaks truth, sometimes even painful truth, but in doing so guards his or her tone so the truth can be well received."³

If you want to see what gentleness looks like, look to Jesus. Throughout the gospels, Jesus shows restraint in exercising his power and his authority. He was God incarnate, and yet he didn't abuse his power to his advantage, or to beat others down. He had all power. He had all authority. But he exercised his power and his authority with gentleness.

The story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well is an example of the gentleness that we would find in the fruit of the Spirit. Most good Jews of Jesus' day didn't mingle with the Samaritans – the Samaritans were seen as despised half-breeds. To associate with the Samaritans would make one unclean.

Then you have to consider the woman, who was not only a Samaritan, but also a woman with a checkered past. As an aside, the fact that she had had five husbands wasn't necessarily her fault. She could've been a widow five times over, though that doesn't seem to be the sense we get from the conversation Jesus has with her. If she has been divorced that many times, people might have looked on her with disgrace, but the truth is it was the husband who initiated divorce in those days, not the wife; she could've simply been tossed out on the street at the whim of her husbands. In any case, the woman is the one who had to carry the shame.

That's why the woman comes to the well when she does. She comes at a time of the day when she knows that nobody will be there, so she doesn't have to bear their stares or their insults. She doesn't have to see her fellow villagers cross the street to avoid her, if she comes to the well in the hottest part of the day.

But look how Jesus treats her. He does not despise her as a Samaritan woman of ill repute; indeed, he engages her in respectful conversation. He

² Billy Graham, *The Holy Spirit: Activating God's Power in Your Life* (Waco: Word Books, 1978), p. 206.

³ <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/parenting/spiritual-growth-for-kids/fruit-of-the-spirit/strength-of-gentleness>

doesn't make her go to another well; in fact, he is even willing to drink from her jug. Even though he is the living manifestation of righteousness, there is no sense of scorn or condescension in his words to the woman, even when he notes her marital history. In fact, Jesus revealed his identity as the Messiah to this woman, well before he had done so to the people of Israel.

This is a picture of gentleness. Where convention and custom would dictate that this woman be treated like the scum of the earth, Jesus refused to bow to such pressure.

Another picture of gentleness can be found at the end of the gospel, when the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples and has breakfast with them on the beach. After breakfast, he takes Peter aside and has a heart-to-heart talk with him. Jesus has words for Peter, who had just a few days prior denied knowing Jesus not once, but three times. Not only did Peter deny knowing Jesus, but he disavowed every notion that Jesus was the Messiah.

And now that Jesus has been raised, Jesus wants to talk to Peter alone. It wouldn't be surprising if Jesus were to light into Peter with fiery anger at Peter's betrayal. It wouldn't be surprising if Jesus were to send Peter away and say, "You deny knowing me? Fine! Have it your way. Get out of here, because I don't want anything to do with you."

Jesus would've been completely justified, had he dealt with Peter in that way.

But that's not what Jesus did, was it? No, instead of banishing Peter, Jesus commissioned him. Feed my sheep, Jesus said. Not once, but three times.

Do you want to know what gentleness looks like? Look to Jesus.

Look to Jesus who, when he was arrested, tortured, spat upon, mocked, and crucified did not call down angels from heaven to strike his adversaries, but instead prayed for them: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

In terms of what gentleness should look like in us, it would include curtailing vengeful and violent impulses; it would mean speaking the truth in love; it would entail considering that the other person is a human being with feelings just like your own.

Gentleness would be the restraint of those combative instincts in us that tell us to strike back when struck or those instincts to strike before being struck.

Of all the traits of the fruit of the Spirit, Billy Graham spends more time on gentleness than he does on the others. After talking about gentleness as power under control, Billy Graham asks, "How do you and I apply gentleness to ourselves?" To that question, he gives a three-fold answer.⁴

⁴ The Holy Spirit, p. 207.

The first way we apply gentleness to ourselves is by doing what I have just described. We suppress that impulse to act out defensively. This is very much what Peter describes in his first epistle, when we are unjustly attacked or persecuted. “For it is a credit to you,” says Peter, “if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly.” Then Peter reminds us how Jesus responded when Jesus was suffering unjustly: “When [Jesus] was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.”⁵

Gentleness means we exercise restraint against our most primal urges to lash out. It means making sure our anger doesn't get the best of us. It means that grace governs more than anger.

The second thing that Billy Graham suggests is that we not crave preeminence. In other words, we don't have to aggressively push our way to the front of the line. Patience and humility are in order here. It's not about our glory, but about God's glory.

The third thing Billy Graham suggests is similar to the second, and that is, don't seek the spotlight for yourself. Instead, as Paul says, we are to honor one another above ourselves.⁶ Again, humility is in order here, to resist the urge to be first, to make everything “about me.”

To live and relate with gentleness means we don't seek preeminence or precedence over others. Gentleness means considering others above ourselves, and considering the Lord as most preeminent of all.

Can you imagine what our world would be like if there were more Christlike gentleness? Bullying and cyberbullying wouldn't be the overwhelming trends they are today. Neither would Twitter and the internet be such a haven for mean-spirited and hurtful words. If there were more Christlike gentleness, politics would be a noble calling.

If there were more Christlike gentleness, I think the world would be a more civil place.

I think we should put gentleness and meekness back on the list of desirable traits.

We should definitely do that.

Amen.

⁵ 1 Peter 2:19, 23

⁶ Romans 12:10