

Gentleness

8 of 9 in series *Marks of a Flourishing Life*

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Gal. 5:22-23; etc.

We're continuing our series called *Marks of a Flourishing Life*. For the last couple of months, we've been talking about the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which Paul lists in chapter 5 of his letter to the Galatians:

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! ¹

All of these are virtues that Jesus cultivates in the lives of his followers by his Spirit as we cooperate with him, as we make space for him. And each one of these virtues has to do with how we relate to other people. The more the Holy Spirit cultivates such fruit in our lives, the more we will flourish as God intends us to in the way we relate to others— at home, at church, at work, at school, in the neighbourhood. And when that happens, a little bit more of God's vision to ultimately make his whole creation a place where everyone and everything flourishes in perfect, interrelated harmony gets realized.

We're closing in on the end of this series. Today, we're going to explore the second-to-last fruit of the Spirit that on Paul's list—*gentleness*.

The original New Testament Greek word for gentleness is *prautes*, which can also be translated as meekness or humility. For example, in Matthew's gospel where Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," the Greek word used for "meek" is *prautes*. ²

Now, in our hard-hitting, ego-driven, market-driven culture, you don't really hear a whole lot about meekness or gentleness. So often, our culture sees meekness is weakness. But authentic biblical meekness or gentleness is anything but weak.

In fact, the ancient Greek imagery often associated with gentleness or *prautes* is that of a wild stallion that's been tamed. The tamed horse is just as strong and fast as it was when it was wild, but its power has been harnessed and channelled in its master's service.

Biblical gentleness is strength under control. It's the fusion of power with loving humility. A gentle person does not overreact. A gentle person is not a slave to his or her

¹ Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)

² See Matthew 5:5

own emotions. A gentle person is not prone to fly off the handle. A gentle person is not inclined to be overbearing, aggressive, demanding, or controlling.

From a biblical point of view, it is not the meek who are weak. It is actually the arrogant, the prideful, the violent, the pushy, the rude, and the gossips who are weak. Jesus shows us that the truly strong are those who are gentle. They are the ones who will ultimately inherit the earth.

With that in mind, I'd like to proceed by dividing the rest of this message into two parts. In the first part, we'll consider *how gentleness enriches relationships*. In the second part, we'll consider some *practices to cultivate gentleness* in our lives.

First, let's look at:

HOW GENTLENESS ENRICHES RELATIONSHIPS

1. Gentleness diffuses conflict.

It deescalates, it curbs, conflict. It can help to diffuse relational time-bombs that are about to explode. Gentleness is an antidote to anger. As the Bible says in Proverbs:

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.³

I read about how human brains have something called "mirror neurons" that fire when we observe another person's behaviour, such that we're inclined to mimic that behaviour. Animals do this too. It's said that these mirror neurons are supposed to help us learn by imitation, and they also help us to empathize with others. But in a fallen world like ours, perhaps mirror neurons are not always our best allies, relationally speaking.

If you get around someone who is cheery and energetic, you tend to feel cheery and energetic, and that's great. But if you hang around long enough someone who's nervous or depressed, you start to feel nervous or depressed. And if someone gets upset at you, what tends to happen? You get upset back. If someone raises their voice at you, chances are, you raise yours higher. And conflict escalates. As the proverb says, "a harsh word stirs up anger."

But, "a gentle answer turns away wrath." Here's a little practical tip that can save you a lot of tension and heartache. When other people raise their voice, lower yours. That simple tip

³ Proverbs 15:1 (NIV)

can save you a lot of conflict in your family and friendships, and at work or in school. I wish this is something I had learned to practice earlier in life, and I still have plenty of room to grow in this, especially at home.

When other people raise their voice, lower yours—and quite often, you’ll find that you’ll get a mirror response from them—they’ll get quieter and calmer. Doing this is a form of gentleness—of strength under control—and perhaps not always, but often, it will help to diffuse conflict. Give it a try this week.

A second way gentleness enriches relationships is that:

2. **Gentleness earns respect.**

In Proverbs, the Bible says that:

A woman of gentle grace will be respected. ⁴

This also true of men, but one woman of gentle grace that was highly respected was Mother Teresa. This diminutive and frail Romanian nun, less than 5 feet tall, could walk into the US Congress and command the attention of every power broker in the room. Why? Because gentleness earns respect.

Gentleness, by the way, is a prerequisite to doing leadership God’s way. To be a Christian leader in any arena of life, you’ll need to learn gentleness, whether you’re leading in the church, in government, in business, in your home, in your community, school or any other organization. Every leader who has ever lead God’s way has been a gentle leader, Jesus himself of course being the supreme example. In 1 Timothy chapter 3, the apostle Paul writes this of church leaders:

Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but **gentle**, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁵

Most Americans would say that Abraham Lincoln was both the greatest and the gentlest president in US history. And you’d be hard-pressed to find a president more respected than Lincoln. On a personal level, Lincoln was known to be gentle—a man of controlled strength—and as president, he showed gentleness to the defeated southern states, and

⁴ Proverbs 16:7 (MSG)

⁵ 1 Timothy 3:2-3 (NIV)

this is what began to heal and unify a nation that had been torn apart Civil War, and it's what that nation could use more of from its leaders today.

Great leaders are gentle. They're not in any way weak, but their strength is controlled. And gentleness earns respect.

The opposite of that statement is also true. Lack of gentleness earns disrespect, as we see in the biblical story of King Rehoboam.⁶

Rehoboam's grandfather was King David, who had united the 12 tribes of Israel into one nation, a nation that grew in power and world influence. Solomon, Rehoboam's father, succeeded David, and during Solomon's reign, Israel reached the apex of its power as a unified kingdom.

When Solomon died, the kingdom was turned over to young Rehoboam, who had no experience in leadership. Nonetheless, his first step as king is a good one. He goes to the older, wiser leaders of the nation—the elders—and asks them for counsel. He basically says, "Hey, I'm a young guy, and I really don't know anything about leadership. What should I do?" They counsel him not to go power-tripping on the people. Don't be harsh with them, but lighten the load of their labour. Harness and control the strength you have as king, and serve the people with gentleness. If you do that, said the elders, the people will serve you loyally and follow you anywhere. So far so good.

But then, Rehoboam decides to get a second opinion. He goes to a bunch of young guys—the buddies he had grown up with—and asks them what they think he should do as the new leader of the nation. They give him the exact opposite advice. They say, you've got to prove your authority by throwing your weight around. You've got to show the nation you've got what it takes to be king by being tough, hard, demanding, and unbending. You need to lay down the law so everyone will know that you're the guy in charge.

Guess which advice Rehoboam followed? He followed the advice not of the elders, but of his peers, the young men. And then what happened? He lost the respect of the nation, and they rebelled. Ten of the twelve tribes of Israel broke away to form their own separate kingdom. That was the end of a united Israel, and the beginning of civil war. From then on, they had little power and influence as a nation. And this turning point in Israel's history came about, in no small part, because Rehoboam refused to lead with gentleness, and lost the respect of the people.

⁶ See 1 Kings 12

If you demand to be followed as a leader, you're not a leader, you're a dictator. There's a big difference between being a boss and being a real leader. A real leader— a godly leader— leads by example and by influence. A godly leader must be a gentle leader, and gentleness earns respect.

One of the greatest leaders in the Bible was Moses. He led Israel out of captivity in Egypt, he trusted God in the face of odds that looked overwhelming, and stood up and spoke truth to Pharaoh, the ruler of the greatest superpower on earth. So Moses was no weakling. And yet in Numbers, it says:

Now Moses was very humble—more humble than any other person on earth.⁷

We've seen that in the Bible, the virtues of humility and gentleness go hand in hand. Given all Moses did, it's very clear that meekness is not weakness. This great leader of God's people was gentle—a person of controlled strength.

What's ironic— and also very hopeful for you and me— is that Moses, though humble and meek, nevertheless struggled with anger issues. In anger, he once killed an Egyptian man. In anger, he threw down and shattered the tablets of the Ten Commandments when he became exasperated with the people. In anger, he disobeyed the clear command of God, and violently struck a rock with his staff to bring water out of it. As consequence, God didn't allow Moses to enter the Promised Land. How could a man with such obvious anger issues become such a humble man, such a gentle man?

The answer is that he was teachable. Moses learned from his mistakes, and allowed God to continue to develop his character. And do you know what that means? It means that if you and I are teachable and responsive to God, we have every reason to believe that by his grace and power at work within us, God can transform us from angry people into gentle people— people whose strength is under control.

Thirdly, gentleness enriches relationships because:

3. Gentleness witnesses to unbelievers.

If you're a Christian, chances are non-believers are looking at your life and conduct all the time. Specifically, they're watching to see if you're any different than they are when you're under stress or pressure. When you respond to pressure with gentleness it's an incredible

⁷ Numbers 12:3 (NLT)

testimony to a world that is not used to gentleness, to strength under control. This is why the New Testament letter of Titus says this of those who follow Jesus:

They must not slander anyone and must avoid quarreling. Instead, they should be gentle and show true humility to everyone. ⁸

Unbelievers aren't going to trust Jesus until they can first trust you. In most cases, unbelievers don't want to know if the Bible's credible; they want to know if *you're* credible.

Are you the real deal? Do unbelievers see in you the Jesus you claim follow, the Jesus who says, "I am gentle and humble of heart"?

If people see Jesus in you, many will listen to what you have to say about Jesus. But in order to win that hearing, we need to be gentle, showing controlled strength and true humility to everyone. As the Bible says in 1 Peter 3:

And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. ⁹

To treat unbelievers with gentleness and respect doesn't mean you agree with them on every point, nor does it mean that you approve of every aspect of their lifestyle. It simply means that you're maintaining your witness for Jesus with them, just like Jesus did with all kinds of rough-around-the-edges lost people in his own day. It was his gentleness that won them over, and it will be his gentleness flowing through us that will win unbelievers over today.

So far, we've looked at some ways that gentleness enriches relationships. We've seen that it diffuses conflict, it earns respect, and it witnesses to unbelievers. Now, let's consider some:

PRACTICES TO CULTIVATE GENTLENESS IN OUR LIVES

We'll look at three practices, and I'll touch on each one briefly. As I do, I encourage you to be listening for a specific practice that you feel God is calling you to work on in the days ahead. The first practice for cultivating gentleness is:

1. Confession

By confession, I'm referring to acknowledging our sins and shortcoming to God in prayer. The Bible says in 1 John:

⁸ Titus 3:2

⁹ 1 Peter 3:15b-16 (NLT)

But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts. ¹⁰

How does the confession of our sins relate to gentleness? Well, the more honest I am with God and myself about my shortcomings, then the more likely I'll be to respond to others with gentleness when they offend or wrong me.

Do you remember the story of how Jesus responded to the woman who'd been caught in the act of adultery? ¹¹

People were getting ready to stone her to death— not the most gentle response! And what did Jesus say? "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Then, one by one, the people in that angry crowd put down their stones and walked away. Then, Jesus told the woman, "Does no one condemn you? Neither do I condemn you. No go, and leave your life of sin."

Practicing confession teaches us to put down our stones, and to be gentle with others, just as God has been gentle with us in Jesus.

A second practice for cultivating gentleness is:

2. Active listening & gentle speech.

These are two sides of the same coin. In James 1:19-20, the Bible says:

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. ¹²

We grow in gentleness by listening carefully to one another. We yield the floor to let another person speak. We endeavour to understand what they're saying, and where they're coming from.

We're often so anxious to be understood, so eager for an opening in the conversation so we can get our point of view across, that we don't listen to others very well, and we override them with our own anxious or aggressive speech. That's not gentle. What does this text say we are to do instead? We are to be quick to listen, and slow to speak.

¹⁰ 1 John 1:9-10 (NLT)

¹¹ See John 8:1-11

¹² James 1:19-20 (NIV)

Active listening is a technique you may be familiar with. It has to do with listening carefully to what the other person is saying, and then, once they've finished, you briefly paraphrase what they said back to them. And you might add a question like, "Am I understanding you correctly?" This gives them the chance to either affirm that you have indeed understood, or to clarify what they're trying to say.

When I was training to become a spiritual director, I learned another practical technique that can help you in being quick to listen and slow to speak. It's called the "gap of silence". Let's say someone is speaking to you, and you're listening. When they finish speaking, instead of immediately responding with your own words, let there be a short gap of silence in the conversation, all the while keeping your attention focused on the person.

If, after a short gap of silence, they don't have more to say, then you can go ahead and speak, perhaps paraphrasing back to them aspects of what they said as a form of active listening.

But do you know what happens more often than not during the gap of silence? During that brief pause in the conversation, they open up and share even more. One of the best gifts we can give each other is the gift of listening well, and these practical techniques can help with that.

The other side of the listening coin is that we need to be gentle in our speech, and that includes both *what* we say, and *how* we say it. The Bible says in Ephesians:

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ¹³

Is your speech marked by gentleness— in your marriage, in your parenting, at work, in church? How about online? Remember, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." ¹⁴

Earlier we talked about lowering your voice when someone else raises theirs as a way of diffusing conflict. Try it. And resist complaining, fault-finding, and gossip. God helping you, always speak to build up, rather than to tear down.

A third practice for growing in gentleness is:

¹³ Ephesians 4:29 (NIV)

¹⁴ See Proverbs 15:1

3. Hanging out with the so-called last, least, and lost.

The prevailing culture teaches us that in order to get ahead in the world, you need to assert yourself. You need to be aggressive. You need to compete, and win. In the process, we often will seek out people of influence who can help us to get ahead, and we often ignore or even trample down those that society considers to be of “no account.”

Contrast that with what the Bible says:

Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.¹⁵

Associating with people of so-called low position— the poor, the weak, the very young, the very aged, the lonely, the sick, the differently-abled, the neurodivergent, and so forth— is a powerful way of growing in gentleness— of letting our Master Jesus channel his strength through us to serve the last, least, and lost, just as he did. “A bruised reed he will not break,” says scripture, “and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”¹⁶

Who of so-called “low position” is Jesus calling you to hang out with?

Conclusion | Closing Prayer

Well today, we’ve seen that biblical gentleness is strength under control. We looked at how gentleness enriches relationships, and we’ve also considered a few practices to make space for the Holy Spirit to cultivate gentleness in our lives.

As we now close this message with prayer, I invite you to hold your palms open, in a receptive posture. This is a prayer is adapted from New Testament scholar Philip Kenneson:¹⁷

Dear Lord Jesus, so often, we mistakenly associate gentleness or meekness with weakness.

But the God you came to reveal, although infinitely powerful, does not exercise power the way the world does. Your life, Lord Jesus, was in no way characterized by the power of coercion or brute force, but rather by the power self-sacrificial love.

¹⁵ Romans 12:16 (NIV)

¹⁶ See Matthew 12:20

¹⁷ Adapted from Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit*.

In the book of Revelation, when the Apostle John looks for the conquering Lion who can open the scroll and its seven seals, he instead sees— a Lamb. The Lion *is* the Lamb, and the way of the Lamb is the way of the cross.

When we look for you as a king born of royalty, we find instead find you as a baby wrapped in strips of cloth lying in a manger, born to a peasant girl of no account.

When your time came to begin your ministry and we look for you to put John the Baptizer in his place, we find instead a Jesus who humbly approaches John in order to be baptized by him.

When we look for you to take the world by storm, to win over those who have power, influence and prestige in order to advance your kingdom more efficiently, we find instead an itinerant preacher and healer who spends much of his time with the weak and outcast of society: children, lepers, prostitutes and tax-collectors.

When we see you rejected by the Samaritans, we look for you to do what your disciples wanted you to do— to rain down fire upon them— but instead you rebuke us for our vengeful spirit.

When we look for you to enter into the royal city as a conquering hero on a white charger to signal to the people that the time has come for you to establish your kingdom, we instead find you entering into Jerusalem astride a humble donkey.

When we gather with you for the last time in that upper room, expecting to get our marching orders and to honor you by pledging our allegiance to you, we find instead that you honor us by washing our feet and by calling us your friends.

When you are arrested and taken before the authorities, we look for you to set those authorities straight, to proclaim proudly and defiantly that you are God's anointed one; instead we find you strangely silent, showing no need to justify yourself.

When we look for a deliverer who will crush the opposition by superior force, we find instead a servant-messiah who allows yourself to be crushed and bruised for us.

What kind of God is this that you have revealed to us Lord Jesus?

O God our Father, who's ultimate power is revealed in Jesus as the power of sacrificial love, fill us afresh with his Spirit this very day we pray, and cultivate in us the good fruit of his gentleness, for the sake of your kingdom, honour and glory. In the name of King Jesus we pray. Amen.

Benediction—Col. 3:12