

The fruit of the spirit – Gentleness

What is gentleness?

Gentleness is a trait that throughout history seems to be one that is not valued. George Bethune in 1839 said:

“Perhaps no grace is less prayed for, or less cultivated than gentleness. Indeed it is considered rather as belonging to natural disposition or external manners, than as a Christian virtue; and seldom do we reflect that not to be gentle is sin”

And I think the same is true today. We seem to accept that we either have a gentle character or not. It has almost been seen as a weak trait to have, one that is best hidden especially in men. Real men are strong, powerful and dominant not gentle. But this rejection of gentleness comes from a misunderstanding of what it means to be gentle. This is crucial, because more than any other virtue this one can be misunderstood. Before we look at what gentleness is, I want to tell you what it is not.

- Gentleness is not timidity or shyness - some people are naturally shy and retiring, that is not gentleness.

- Gentleness is not weakness - Eli was a good, godly man but he was weak. He failed to discipline his sons. Someone looking on might have thought, “Isn’t he gentle with them.” But his failure to deal with them was not gentleness but weakness.

- Gentleness is not the general failure to rebuke or admonish. Look at the way Jesus rebuked Peter - "Get behind me Satan" - and the Pharisees - "Woe to you brood of vipers". And look at what Paul says - "rebuke them sharply". And yet Jesus (and Paul) never failed to be gentle.

My definition is of gentleness then is this: "Gentleness is the tender application of truth or discipline to the weak."

To unpack that a little let me say this. The last word is critical. Gentleness is how we treat weak people, not about how we are sometimes called to treat strong, arrogant or erring people. Gentleness is about the way we restore the weak or point out the mistakes of the weak. Billy Graham once defined gentleness as, “mildness in dealing with others...it displays a sensitive regard for others and is careful never to be unfeeling for the rights of others”. Gentleness is active then, describing the manner in which we treat others, whereas meekness is a passive trait describing how we respond when others mistreat us.

Have you ever received a package with fragile tape on it? That tells us to be gentle as the contents is fragile, you can’t just go throwing that parcel around. As we deal with people, a person with true gentleness will look for the fragile tape.

Gentleness is very close to patience and humility. In Ephesians 4:1-2, humility and gentleness go together.

So, to sum up what gentleness is, gentleness pertains to when we come across someone weak and how we treat them. That weakness may refer to someone who is spiritually empty, they may be physically ill, they may be young in the faith, or they may be young in years. This weak one, who needs some word of correction or admonition. Doing that as Christ would have us do it, is where gentleness comes in!

Gentleness in God's character

God

God is the ultimate example of gentleness.

Example 1: "A bruised reed he will not break and a smoking flax he will not put out" (Isaiah 42:3). Here is someone who is very broken, a reed that has been bent in half, a wick that is no longer burning but just about to die out and is in its last smoking moments. God does not break that bent over reed, God does not snuff out that dying ember. He doesn't condemn them for their weakness or come down with a heavy hand. No, he cares for them gently and restores them

Example 2: God is like a gentle parent. A gentle parent is not one who doesn't discipline, but one who knows that his children are weak and vulnerable. Psalm 103:13-14 – "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust."

Jesus

Or what about Jesus? Jesus was extremely gentle but that doesn't mean he was a wimp who never raised his voice or stood up to others. On the contrary Jesus could speak the truth very boldly and confront people with great strength. There are plenty of illustration in the gospels of that. But his greatest strength was best seen in his gentleness. Jesus never got aggressive or belligerent when his enemies tried to trick, goad, or falsely accuse him. Jesus never bullied or belittled but made time for those in society who were treated that way.

Matt 11:29 – Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus calls the hurting and offers rest in his gentle care.

Example 1: How about the way he treated the Samaritan woman at the well? He doesn't condemn or despise her like her society has but instead, in a firm yet gentle way, Jesus probes her need and problems until she recognises it for herself and turned to Him to meet it.

Example 2: The way Jesus treated Peter, after Peter had fallen - and so was now not strong but very weak. He restored his thrice denial with three questions, "Do you love me"? Having to answer that question three times must have been painful for Peter, but he probably thought he had no way back, that his role as a disciple was over. But Jesus doesn't shout at

him, tell him off or shame him in front of the other disciples. No, he just gently asks him a simple question. My guess is that the other disciples didn't even know what was happening. Peter the failure becomes Peter the forgiven through the gentleness of Jesus.

Gentleness in our character

Gentleness is still countercultural today and is evidence of the Spirit within us at work. The gentleness is the character of Christ dwelling within us but I think in practical day to day terms it comes from a deep rooted humility. By that I mean that we realise that we are also flawed, tempted humans who mess up. I cannot feel superior to others since I am also a sinner. I treat others gently because I, in my failings, also need to be treated gently.

Gentleness is a fruit of the spirit and we are also instructed to clothe ourselves with it (Colossians 3:12 - Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.)

To be gentle will first mean actively seeking to make others feel at ease in our presence. We should not be so opinionated or dogmatic that others are afraid to express their opinion. Instead by making them at ease we allow them to share their opinions and weaknesses knowing they will be handled gently.

Then a gentle person will seek to change a wrong opinion or attitude by persuasion and kindness not domination or intimidation. This is done by avoiding blunt speech and answering with sensitivity and respect. Gentleness means you can't just say what you think no matter the cost. On the occasions wounds through words are necessary a gentle Christian will seek to bind those wounds with consolation and encouragement.

Gentleness means you cannot gossip, degrade or belittle others in their weakness. A gentle Christian will grieve for that weak brother or sister and pray for them earnestly.

We need to show gentleness to fellow believers (Galatians 6:1 Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently), particularly when there is failure in their lives. If we want to see restoration in people, we need to be gentle with them. This is particularly true for church leaders (2 Tim 2:24-26 - And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.) But it also applies to all, not just church leaders (Titus 3:2 - to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone).

If gentleness is the soft application of truth to the weak, then we need to think about it in the following circumstances:

- (1) Treating broken people – Think about the gentle way Jesus treated the broken woman about to be stoned.

- (2) Treating young, baby Christians – Think about the gentle way Jesus treated his disciples' ignorance - "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand" (Mark 4:33). Jesus did not give meat to babies, only milk, and so with young Christians, it's no use giving them meat!
- (3) Treating the lost – (1 Peter 3:15) If we give them some deep theology book, what good will that do them? Paul starts, both in Lystra and Athens, where they are, pagans aware of a good world and a grand creation.

Psalm 18:35 in the ESV is translated as 'Your gentleness made me great'. The NIV translates it as 'You stoop down to make me great.' So, gentleness is stooping down to help someone. God continually stoops down to help us, and he wants us to do the same: to be sensitive to the rights and feelings of others. There is no greater way in which God stooped down than when he took on flesh and came as a baby on that very first Christmas. If God is so gentle as to come as a baby, what is your excuse for not developing gentleness in your character through the help of God?

Seek a gentle spirit. Earnestly pray for one. If you are brave enough, ask others if they think you are gentle.