

November 18, 2007

“The Fruit of the Spirit: Gentleness” Galatians 5:22-23

FCF: Confusion about and longing for genuine gentleness

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Because gentleness is the fruit of the Spirit,
(anchor) we must look to the Spirit to cultivate gentleness in our lives.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

“Gentleness” is likely the most neglected of any virtue we could discuss. And I know why. Think of Charles Wesley’s, “Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild” ([READ lyric](#)):

*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child;
Pity my simplicity, suffer me to come to Thee.*

That just doesn’t do much for me. Nor do the effeminate images of Jesus I can recall seeing as a child – those wimpy glazed-eyed portraits with that long, flowing hair.

Those images collide with our ideas of what it is to be “strong.” Riding tall in the saddle, shooting straighter, hitting harder, winning against all odds, no tears allowed.

Which brings a dilemma. If that’s what “gentle Jesus” was like and this is what strength entails, then the two have little in common and Jesus is left with little appeal. But history is clear He was and is compelling, magnetic, not weak in any way. Could it be we’ve got this “gentle Jesus” thing all wrong? And our idea of “strength” as well?

SCRIPTURE READING: [Galatians 5:16-26](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

What is “gentleness”? Donald Grey Barnhouse illustrated it ([READ quote](#)):

Many people have a totally wrong idea of (this), but they can learn the true meaning by listening to jockeys and horse-trainers after a horse race. The horse that wins the race is “the meekest on the track.” This is the horse most under control, the horse that responds most quickly to the jockey’s guidance. The self-willed horse, the factious horse, is frequently left at the post; when he does get started he may run faster than some of the others, but he does not finish with the leaders who were meek.

There’s something of that with gentleness, this fruit of the Spirit. But more on that later.

Keep in mind the context of this letter. Paul is writing to the church in the Roman province of Galatia. Early on, their relationship with him had been sweet, their trust in his teaching solid, and their adherence to Christ secure. But in the months since, a new teaching had swept through and all that had been undone. The emphasis was no longer on the finished work of Christ but the ongoing efforts of man, no longer grace but works, no longer resting but striving. And its effects were being felt. Insecurity before God has a way of bleeding over into insecurity before man. Which leads to the “desires” and “works of the flesh” Paul speaks of here – so many of which have to do with the undoing of community. And so Paul was calling them back, back to their trusting in the finished work of Christ, back to their living in the power of the gospel. Back to gentleness.

But while we are to such gentleness and commanded to show forth such fruit in every area of our lives, we cannot muster it up on our own. Gentleness, after all, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And so it is to the Holy Spirit we must look that such fruit would come forth. Which becomes all the clearer as we consider two things. First, what such gentleness actually entails and, second, how it is to be shown. The more we see what gentleness really is and then where it is called forth, the more we see we need the Spirit.

I. WHAT IT ENTAILS

Well, that said, what then is this gentleness? What does it entail?

A) *What It Is Not*

Let's make sure we're clear as to what it is not. It is not weakness.

1. Timidity

Gentleness is not to be confused with timidity, with fear, with an inability to act. It is no passive selfishness, avoiding trouble at all costs – at the cost of greater trouble to come.

2. False modesty

Gentleness is not timidity. Nor is it false modesty, a self-deprecating spineless refusal to stand for anything. It is not the inability to see any dignity, value, or contributions to be made. It does not brush off the gifts God has given and the success He has wrought.

B) *What It Really Is*

Gentleness is not weakness. It is strength. The great British preacher from the last century, Martyn Lloyd-Jones described it this way ([READ quote](#)): “(It is) a humble and gentle attitude to others based on a true estimate of ourselves.”

1. Knowing who we really are

It begins with knowing who we are. Not the infinite Creator but finite creatures. Not flawless servants but fallen sinners. Jesus makes this point in the first three of the Beatitudes. The order is significant ([READ Matthew 5:3-5](#)). Understand that “meek” here stems from the same word as this fruit of the Spirit, “gentleness,” in Galatians 5.

2. Acting on that knowledge

Gentleness begins with knowing who we are. And then it acts based on what it knows. We know ourselves to be spiritually bankrupt. We mourn that deeply. And we act on it.

Illustration:

Jesus, the only One who has ever been perfectly gentle, shows this – this knowing who one is and then acting on it (though obviously in His case without sin). There came a point where, even as the hostility to Him from the religious establishment was rising, His support was yet gaining ground among the people. But it was a support that wanted to make Him a warrior king, a Messiah of another kind ([READ Matthew 12:14-21](#)).

It takes strength to know when to walk away and to stay on task. Jesus had a quiet awareness of both who He was (and is) and the power at His disposal. He didn't need to prove anything – not to Himself or anyone else. And that then freed Him to show such gentleness to those in need, fulfilling what Isaiah had said would come to pass.

Application:

The point is that we need to take whatever we thought we knew about gentleness and throw it out. It's not weakness. It's strength. Listen to Paul's words here ([READ 1 Timothy 6:11-12a](#)). If I may speak to the men here, this is not just for women. Gentleness is not a virtue meant only for the fairer gender. It's clear that gentleness is something that should typify all of us with no exceptions ([READ Ephesians 4:1-2](#)).

So here's the thing. Recognizing what this entails, you have to decide if you want to develop this. “*Is this what I want? Do I want to grow in this?*” If you see it for what it is, you should want to. And if you do, you need to know you can't do it alone. You'll need the insight of others around you. And you'll need the work of the Spirit within you.

II. WHERE IT SHOWS

Simply seeing what this entails bears that out. As does seeing where it's to show itself, the contexts in which gentleness is called forth. It's not a virtue for a life in isolation. It comes about in the fire, feeling the heat, under duress, in times of conflict.

A) *When Facing Criticism*

When facing criticism, we are to show forth gentleness.

1. Able to receive it

Able to receive criticism. Able to hear it and handle it.

2. Free from defensiveness

Being free from defensiveness. Knowing who you are, knowing whose you are, knowing that, ultimately, what others think doesn't matter. It won't undo you. And so you can listen to whatever kernel of truth there might be and let the rest go. And then be gentle.

Illustration:

Think again of Jesus, the gentle One and His refusal to insist upon and stand up for His rights ([READ Isaiah 53:7](#)). Abused by soldiers, flogged by Pilate, all but silent during His trial, it was only when He was crucified that He spoke up. And among those words were these, “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*” This is not weakness. It is strength and it comes out when others are bearing down on you.

B) When Seeking to Correct

Gentleness shows itself when facing criticism. And when seeking to correct. It sees the bruised reeds and smoldering wicks as what they are and treats them accordingly – as easily broken and needing gentle handling, as easily snuffed out and needing care.

1. Standing up to what is wrong

Yes, standing up to what is wrong – whether it be a situation or individuals. Yet without heavy handedness. Lord willing, we'll be looking at this text more thoroughly in a few weeks ([READ Galatians 6:1](#)). Or, consider 2 Timothy 2 ([READ 2 Timothy 2:24-25a](#)).

2. Facing what comes with boldness

Gentleness shows itself when standing up to what is wrong. And then in facing what usually comes with a certain boldness as well ([READ Proverbs 25:15; Proverbs 15:1](#)).

All this is to say the Spirit works a gentleness that is tough as well as tender.

Illustration:

And, again, we see this exemplified in Jesus. ([READ John 2:13-17](#)) The gentle One was no weakling. He took up a whip and turned out all those who had made a marketplace out of the Temple. We see it in Paul, the apostle of Jesus, as well. You hear the strength in his urging upon the Corinthians ([READ 2 Corinthians 10:1a](#)). And yet, at the same time, there is a tenderness to his toughness as well ([READ 1 Thessalonians 2:7](#)). Such is the balance of a Spirit-wrought gentleness in the heart of the follower of Christ.

Application:

Which brings me to this. What about us? There is a checklist worth considering. Talk of “benchmarks” has been in the air quite a bit as of late. Here are some from Jerry Bridges' book, The Fruitful Life. Let me read them to you ([READ Bridges “exercises”](#)):

On a scale of 0 to 5 (0 = this is not at all true of you, and 5 = this is strongly true of you), rate yourself on the following qualities. Then ask a friend to rate you.

- *I am sensitive to other people's rights and feelings.*
- *People relax in my presence. They don't have to worry about being looked down on or criticized.*
- *I don't condemn other people for their weakness. I speak the truth gently until their true need is exposed and they are open to my help.*
- *I am sensitive to others' opinions and ideas.*
- *I don't make people feel guilty for being less serious about their faith than I am.*
- *I seek to change someone's wrong opinion or attitude by persuasion and kindness, not by domination or intimidation.*
- *I don't threaten people, either directly or indirectly.*
- *I avoid blunt speech and an abrupt manner.*

- *I talk to people with sensitivity and respect.*
- *I'm not threatened by opposition. I don't resent those who oppose me.*
- *I don't degrade or belittle or gossip about someone who falls into sin. Instead I will grieve and pray for that person.*
- *I am fair, considerate, and generous rather than rigid and exacting.*
- *I listen to reason.*

So, how are you faring? Take heart! None of it is possible in our own strength – neither the honest assessment nor the change of heart. We need the Spirit. We need the Spirit.

CONCLUSION:

As did Paul's readers, the Galatians, so too do we. Which brings me back to where we started. Security before God flows over into security before man and then allows for the gentleness we've been talking about. And security before God, being sure of where we stand with Him, can be found only by standing at the foot of the cross and relying upon the finished work of Christ. That we ourselves might grow in gentleness, we need to rest in what He has done, be assured of His deep and inexhaustible affections for us, asking Him to reveal where we are failing to show forth His fruit, and crying out for His help. For, if the truth be told, we are that "bruised reed" and that "smoldering wick" of which Isaiah spoke, for whom Jesus came, and of whom He so gently cares.

I'm reminded of a scene from the film, "The Horse Whisperer" ([READ IV2](#)):

In the movie...Tom Booker, played by actor Robert Redford, employs his special gift of "gentling" horses. A tense, New York magazine editor can't believe her eyes as she witnesses the gradual transformation of her daughter's horse from traumatized to tamed. In one telling scene, the horse, frightened by the editor's ringing cell phone, gallops off into the far end of a large pasture. Booker walks into the pasture and sits down, where he waits for what appears to be hours. The horse, drawn by its curiosity, inches closer and closer. Finally, it cautiously approaches close enough to touch the "whisperer," and allows itself to be led back to the safety of its stall.

That's really the way it is with God, as He "gentles" the untamed or traumatized – whether it be horses or people, bruised reeds and smoldering wicks. It's a good image.

But so too is this. Remember what Isaiah said about the Suffering Servant. Jesus became that for our sakes. He became the bruised reed and the smoldering wick for us. His is no theoretical gentleness but beautifully present and real. He became that for our sakes. And He desires to work that into our hearts, making us agents of His gentleness in this world to all those He has placed around us. Let's go to Him now in prayer.

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Because gentleness is the fruit of the Spirit,
(anchor) we must look to the Spirit to cultivate gentleness in our lives.