

“Gentleness”
John 21:15-19
August 20, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

The eighth fruit of the Spirit is gentleness, translated “meekness” in some translations. It is sometimes misunderstood as suggesting weakness and spinelessness. The gentle man or woman is not the one who willingly becomes a doormat for others. Rather, it is the strong one who possesses great strength but refuses to use that strength to force or attempt to control others. The strength of the gentle person, on the other hand, is used to help, encourage and restore others. In classical Greek, the most characteristic use of this word is to describe the character in which strength and gentleness go together. For example, Plato uses this word of the watchdog. He is bravely hostile to strangers but gently friendly with those who are familiar to him.

One of the features of this word as it is used in the New Testament is its frequent mention in situations of conflict. In other words, gentleness is particularly helpful when you need to have a hard conversation about something. We can see that in a verse following soon after the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. In Galatians 6:1, Paul writes, **“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”** That qualifies as a hard conversation, don’t you think? Someone is caught in a sin, and you are tasked with going to that person to have a conversation about it. That’s enough to make most of us break out in a cold sweat. We want to say, “It’s none of my business,” and walk away from the challenge of having the conversation. Or we might try another way to avoid the conversation, turning it into an accusation against the other person by saying, “It probably won’t do any good anyway.” But we are commanded to have some of these hard conversations, and to bring this quality of gentleness to the conversation.

I think we would all agree that the skill of having a conversation where there is both disagreement and gentleness is growing more and more rare in our day. The polarization we are seeing in our political world, our culture as a whole and even in our churches, is growing more commonplace. What an opportunity this is for the church. As in every other quality within the fruit of the Spirit, Jesus is the perfect embodiment of gentleness. Let’s note the gentle qualities we see in Jesus’ famous interactions with Peter after Peter’s threefold denial of Jesus.

I. Gentle People Ask Questions

The first words Jesus spoke directly to Peter after Jesus' resurrection are in the form of a question. **"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"** (21:15). This question is Jesus' effort to close the breach that had formed between Peter and Jesus, a breach caused by Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus when Jesus was arrested. In spite of Peter's pledge of loyalty to Jesus, a pledge to die with him if necessary, spoken just hours before the arrest, at the question of a servant girl Peter denied even knowing Jesus. He did so three times. Imagine the pain this must have brought to the heart of Jesus. A disciple who was one of the three who were closest to Jesus, with whom they had spent the better part of three and a half years together, not only abandons Jesus but denies even knowing him. And now they are having their first one-on-one conversation.

In spite of the pain of this betrayal from his friend, Jesus approaches Peter with the gentleness of a question. He doesn't shame him by saying something like, "Peter, shame on you! How could you do such a thing?" Nor does he write him off by ignoring him. These are two common responses to conflict between people. Some people attack and try to shame others or try other methods to make them pay for their offense. Others just write off the relationship, often with words like, "There's no point in talking to this person because it won't do any good." Jesus did neither. He engaged with the gentleness of a question.

What is the goal of asking questions? They are a very effective means of helping a person see the true nature of their heart. Jesus asked Peter, **"Do you love me more than these?"** A couple of different explanations have been offered for the "these." Some see it as referring to the fishing implements around them. In other words, Jesus is asking Peter if he really does love Jesus more than his occupation of being a fisherman. The other explanation, and the one I think is the correct one, sees in this word a reference to the other disciples, those Peter had argued with about whose love for Jesus was the greatest and strongest. Just before his denial of Jesus, Peter had boldly declared, **"Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will"** (Matt. 26:33).

Jesus is going after Peter's heart. Comparisons with others are usually a way we avoid dealing with heart issues. "At least I'm not as bad as So-and-So." Now Jesus' question reminds Peter of his empty boast of being superior to others in his loyalty and love for Jesus. Feeling good about himself through comparisons is now no longer possible. Peter must now deal with his heart and Jesus' question invites him to do just that. Jesus is demonstrating for us this quality of gentleness in our relationships.

This reminds me of one of Aesop's fables. The North Wind and the Sun are having a quarrel about which of them is the stronger. They see a Traveler passing by and decide upon a test to settle their dispute. They agree that the stronger one will be the one who can strip the Traveler of his coat. The North

Wind goes first and sends a cold, howling blast against the man. The first gust does indeed send his unbuttoned cloak flapping in the wind. But it causes him only to secure all his buttons against the cold wind. The North Wind increases the force and decreases the temperature of his efforts, which only cause the Traveler to secure his coat more tightly. He finally gives up. Then the Sun begins to shine. The pleasant rays are a welcome warmth to the traveler after the cold winds, causing him once again to unbutton his coat. The Sun continues to beam his warm rays down until the man starts sweating and decides to remove his coat.

We are often like the North Wind, thinking that by the force of our arguments we can persuade others to do what we think they need to do. The place where you see this belief most clearly is on the internet, especially on social media sites. I saw a cartoon recently where a man is furiously typing away on a computer. His wife's voice comes from the bedroom, "It's late, when are you coming to bed?" He replies, "I'm doing something really important." "What," she asks. "Someone is wrong on the internet," he responds as he is furiously typing away. There have been studies done on the effectiveness of fact-checking as a response to false stories that get spread. While such efforts are definitely worth doing for the sake of standing for the truth, fact-checking has proven itself to be of limited value in actually changing people's minds. Human nature is the reason for this. While we like to think that we are rational, objective creatures who will go wherever the evidence takes us, the truth is that most of us start with the conclusions we want and then filter the evidence to support these conclusions. In other words, the battle is in the heart and not the mind.

The fable of the North Wind and the Sun shows an important feature of gentleness. Gentle persuasion seeks to go from the inside out, not the outside in. The Wind tried the outside-in approach of force, while the Sun sought to motivate the traveler to remove the coat. The gentleness of asking questions invites a person to such inside-out change. It is often slower, but in the long run far more effective.

II. Gentle People Are Future-Focused

The gentleness of Jesus is seen not only in asking questions of Peter, but also in his goal of seeking a good future for him. When there's been conflict and we have been hurt by someone, it's easy to focus on past offenses. Jesus does none of that, focusing instead on Peter's future. If Peter is to have a good future, his relationship to Jesus must be repaired. We've all experienced the pain of a relational disruption. If you're married and have a fight with your spouse, the ensuing relational disruption becomes all-consuming, making it hard to move forward in other areas of life. Peter had just such a need to repair

his relationship with Jesus. Jesus knows that, and in his gentleness moves toward Peter to bring about such a repair.

We see Jesus' efforts to do so in the fact that he asks the same question three times. **"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"** (vv. 15, 16, 17). Just as Peter had denied Jesus three times, Jesus now wants him to be able to state three times his love for Jesus. The three-fold repetition of this question wasn't for Jesus' sake, but for Peter's. It wasn't that Jesus was doubting Peter's answer. We would be wrong to interpret this as if Jesus is saying to Peter, "I'm not so sure I believe you, Peter. Are you sure you really love me?" Rather, the repetition is for Peter's sake, leading him in the end to call upon the divine knowledge of Jesus to confirm his sincere love. **"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you"** (v. 17). To be able to invite the all-seeing gaze of Jesus upon his heart to affirm the existence of his love for Jesus, Peter is growing in his conviction that he really does love Jesus. He is no longer to identify himself as a Jesus-denier, but as a Jesus-lover.

We also see Jesus' focus on Peter's future through the assignment with which he entrusts him. **"Feed my lambs,"** and **"Tend my sheep,"** he tells Peter. Nothing is more valuable to Jesus than his precious sheep. Jesus gave his life for his sheep, and now he puts these precious sheep in the care of a man with a blemished past. But Jesus doesn't define us by our past. Instead, he sees our good future that he himself works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

As we communicate with people with whom we may have some disagreement or conflict, the gentleness we are to exhibit requires us to see them for what God can make of them, rather than defining them by the mess they may have made of themselves.

III. Gentle People Value Understanding Before Being Understood

Peter was counting on Jesus to understand him, appealing to that understanding to know that Peter really did love Jesus. **"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."** When we value being understood above understanding, it usually leads us to be more harsh than gentle. I think this is what leads to much of the ugliness found on social media, where most seem to value getting their point across and too few slow down enough to try to understand others.

Gentle people are learners who seek to understand before they speak and attempt to be understood. Let's look at two verses that speak of this. In 1 Peter 3:15 we are told to be prepared always **"to make a defense to anyone who asks you for the reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."** Peter is speaking here of our interactions with

unbelievers. We are not to bludgeon them with truth, but treat them with gentleness and respect. What does that look like? Among other things, it means that we are to seek to understand what motivates them at a heart level. It's been pointed out by many that evangelism has changed in the past decades. It used to be the case that most Americans accepted the basic realities of the Bible. They believed in God, sin, heaven and hell, and only needed someone to connect the dots for them by showing Jesus as the God-provided way for sinners to be forgiven and go to heaven. But the ground has shifted beneath us. While there are still some who may be reached by simply helping them connect these dots, most people now require that we start further back with them. As has often been pointed out, this is what we see Paul doing in Acts 17 when he preached in Athens. He affirmed what he saw of their beliefs and desires that were true, and then pointed to Jesus as the realization of these deeper desires. This requires that we take time to get to know people. And it also requires that we show respect by asking their permission for sharing with them. I'll give a plug here for our "Baby Steps in Outreach" class that will be offered again in our fall Sunday School program.

Another way in which gentle people are learners is in our receiving of God's word. James writes, **"receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls"** (James 1:21). "Meekness" is the same word as our word "gentleness" in the list of the fruit of the Spirit. It is similar to humility. We are to approach the Bible as learners who humbly acknowledge that we are wrong about many things and need God's truth in our lives.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus is the perfect embodiment of gentleness, and in his gentleness he invites us to come to him. **"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls"** (Matt. 11:29). May we come humbly to gentle Jesus, learn from him, receive his forgiveness, grow in gentleness, and find rest for our souls!