



## THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: GENTLENESS

Isaiah 40:1-11; Galatians 6:1-10

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Gentleness is not a virtue or characteristic that is very highly prized in our *me first, assert yourself, push to the front of the line and beat the competition* culture. We seem to admire strength, muscle, and forcefulness more than gentleness. Yet, Paul says that gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit. Maybe a part of the problem is that we have the wrong idea about gentleness.

When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, the children of Israel were taken into exile. They mourned their loss; they longed for home. They grew bitter with their captors who demanded they sing their worship songs to entertain a pagan crowd. Their rage swelled up into psalms of lament: “By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres ...How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” If they had had the strength and the power, they would have enacted vengeance upon their captors. Yet, God had another idea.

After years of captivity, the prophet Isaiah tells the captives the new thing that God is doing for them. Their time of captivity is over. God will create a highway in the desert and bring them home. The strong arm of God will deliver them. The words of Isaiah portray the strength of God who lifts up the valleys and bring down the mountains, who can cause the grass to wither and the flowers to fade. Then the prophet says a remarkable thing about how God in this powerful act of liberation will lead the most vulnerable home with the tender care of a shepherd:

He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather  
the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:11)

The point is this: it takes great strength to be gentle.

There is no surprise that God is portrayed through the image of the strong but gentle shepherd. It is no accident that David, the ideal king, was a shepherd. Jesus speaks of himself as the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. To carry a lamb through the wilderness, to patiently guide a mother sheep, to lead a people to freedom, to guide a people in the ways of God, and to give your life for others are all evidence of the kind of strength it takes to be gentle.

In the face of the controversies Paul addresses in the Corinthian churches, he declares that he will deal with them not by human standards of strength, but by divine strength which is the gentleness of Christ. The gentleness of Christ has the power to resolve controversies, heal relationships, conquer pride, right wrongs, and overcome divisions (2 Corinthians 10). These are things that human strength cannot do.

The first question of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which is one of the confessions of the Presbyterian Church, speaks of the comfort we find in the gentle strength and tender care of God manifest in Jesus:

...who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all  
my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion

of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. The word *meek* is the same word we translate as *gentle*. From our point of view the meek get stepped on, but from God’s point of view the gentle embody the ways of God in the world.

Some time ago, I was at the service counter at one of the giant box stores in our community. Ahead of me in line was a large and powerful man. Around him were five younger men who had a variety of obvious mental and physical challenges. As the clerk helped him with his needs, I watched him interact with these young men in his care. He answered their questions, encouraged their interaction, put his arms around them, laughed at their jokes, and explained to them the words they heard but did not understand. In short, he treated them with astonishing gentleness.

It has often been said that the moral character of a society can be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable members. Do we as a church demonstrate the gentle strength of God? When Jesus saw the disciples pushing away the families who were bringing children to him to be blessed, he called them out and stopped them short. They thought Jesus had more important things to do, more significant people to meet, and better ways to spend his time. Not so. He welcomed the children just like he welcomed the poor, the sick, and the outcasts. He took them up in his arms and he blessed them.

It takes great moral, spiritual, emotional, and, even at times, physical strength to be gentle. We are to manifest the gentleness of God in our relations with one another. When things are going well, this seems like a relatively easy thing to do. When trust is broken, relationships are strained, and the peaceful unity of a community is threatened, this is when the virtue of gentleness is crucial. When something goes awry, when someone violates our sense of right and wrong, when things do not go our way, or when we are hurt by another person, our first reaction may be to get angry, break the relationship, demand our way, or try to get even.

Paul says that such an experience gives us another opportunity. In Christ, we have another way of dealing with things. Paul writes to the Galatians, “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted” (Galatians 6:1). The goal of discipline is reconciliation and restoration. Paul notes that when we have the Spirit of God within us, we will act to forgive, redeem, and restore the one who has fallen. We are to deal with others in a spirit of gentleness. It is easy to get angry, to punish, and to seek revenge. It takes spiritual strength to bear the burdens of others including the wounds they have caused us. It takes spiritual strength to deal gently with another, to forgive someone and to restore that person.

Paul says that we are to watch out – be careful – lest we too are tempted. As we work to restore someone, the temptation is not that we will fall into the same error or sin that they have committed. No, the temptation is that we will become proud of our own righteousness – judging our neighbor and excusing ourselves. We will fall into the trap of thinking we are morally superior. This is why Paul says that we should not think we are better than others when we compare our lives to the life of someone else. This leads us to self-deception and pride. Seeking to restore

another in a spirit of gentleness teaches us that we are all sinners who rest in and stand upon the grace of God. St Augustine reminds us that the church is not a hotel for saints, but a hospital for sinners. It takes real spiritual strength to practice the gentleness of God.

The first congregation we served was in a rural community in eastern North Carolina. The church was filled with large inter-related families. People worked together; farmed together; lived for generations side by side; and married into one another's families. Some members of the church seemed to think that the church was for the good folks in the community; they tended to look down on the people who did not come to the church. They shook their heads when these folks lost a job, had a marriage break-up, or drank too much. Most of the congregation saw their neighbors from a different perspective. When someone lost a job, they brought food or slipped them some money; when a family fell apart, they listened to their problems and included the kids in their own family activities; when someone fell off the wagon, they invited them to join them for church; when a neighbor got arrested, they visited her in jail. This strong, hardworking, no-nonsense folk knew how to enfold their sisters and brothers in the gentle strength of Jesus.

I want to see the gentleness of Christ flow through us when we pray for the sick, feed the hungry, listen to the troubled, welcome the stranger, care for the elderly, and teach the faith to our children. I want to see us find the spiritual strength to deal with controversies in the church and community with a listening spirit, a compassionate heart, and a gentle word. I want to see how we can be more like Jesus whose strength is found in gentleness. When Isaiah describes the gentleness of God in bringing the exiles home, I think of who we can be today. We are God's shepherds who care for the flock, who seek out the lost, who hold the lambs to our breasts. In our gentle embrace, we welcome all home.

Many years ago, when I was a seminary intern at First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, one of my responsibilities was to minister to the folks who came to the church for assistance. The church is located downtown. At that time, before all of the urban redevelopment in Charlotte, the bus station was about two blocks away. Many people came to the church for aid. We helped with food, bus tickets, housing referrals, homeless shelters, and addiction treatment. I remember one inebriated man who came for help during the week of the annual special renewal services. We tried to help him as best we could.

Then that night during the worship service, he came back. The guest preacher for the week was Dr. David H. C. Read, the legendary Scottish pastor who served for many years at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. During the Second World War, Dr. Read had been a prisoner in a German POW camp. He knew what it was to suffer and to be set free; he knew what it was to be a sinner and to be redeemed by the grace of Christ; he knew what it was to be exiled and brought home.

As Dr. Read finished preaching and was preparing to give the benediction, I heard the loud footsteps of the man coming down the aisle. When he reached the front of the church, he looked up at Dr. Read and said, "Pray for me, Father." That whole staid Presbyterian congregation held its breath. Dr. Read said, "I will my son." He came down from the pulpit and put his strong but gentle arms around the kneeling man and blessed him.