

The Fruit of the Spirit – Session 9

Gentleness

Gentleness is a fruit of the spirit that is fundamental to our relationships with our fellow human beings – especially those who are pushy or offensive, or otherwise cause us to lose our patience. Gentleness is a disposition that is even tempered, tranquil and has all our passions under control.

The Greek word sometimes translated as ‘gentleness’ in the NT is *prautes* (Galatians 5:23). This same Greek word is also translated as ‘meek’ (Matthew 5:5) and ‘humility’ (Titus 3:2). In the NT we find three meanings for this Greek word *praute*. Firstly, it means being submissive to God’s will (Matthew 5:5; 11:29; 21:5). Secondly, it means being teachable and not too proud to learn (James 1:21). Thirdly, and most frequently, it means being considerate (1 Corinthians 4:21; 2 Corinthians 10:1; Ephesians 4:2). Aristotle’s definition of the word was “the quality of a man who is always angry at the right time and never at the wrong time. What throws most light on it’s meaning is that the adjective *praus* is used of an animal that has been tamed and brought under control; and so the word speaks of that self control which Christ alone can give.”

Gentleness is clearly very closely related to meekness and humility. In our modern world these alternative translations perhaps indicate weakness or lack of strength. In fact they mean rather the opposite – strength under control. As we see from Aristotle’s definition of the word just quoted, the Greeks used the word ‘*prautes*’ when describing an animal that had been tamed – like a horse for example. Any of you who’ve ever ridden a horse will know that it has great strength, but when it’s well ridden that strength comes under perfect control. Christians who exhibit the fruit of gentleness are balanced. They don’t over-react or under-react and have learned temperance in their speech, actions and decisions.

Gentleness is a sign of wisdom:

“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.” (James 3:17 NKJV)

Jesus said:

“28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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.” (Matthew 11:28-29 NIV)

Insecure people think they need to prove their strength, those who are strong and confident don’t need to constantly prove their points. Jesus could have demonstrated incredible power, yet he was gentle. We also should keep our passions in check and our disposition should demonstrate softness or touchability. The only way we can do this is to let Jesus help us to be like him through the power of the spirit.

When we’re around people who constantly disagree with us we may become quiet and unresponsive or we may become angry. We should give a controlled response – that’s the gentle way. That doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be a strong response when the occasion calls for it. Look at what Jesus did when the Jerusalem Temple was being treated disrespectfully: “15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through

the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"? But you have made it 'a den of robbers'." (Mark 11:15-17 NIV)

Because of the serious nature of the situation strong action was required and Jesus provided it. But, he didn't react impulsively or rashly, he knew exactly what he was doing.

Paul understood the need to be gentle. He wrote to the Thessalonians:

"6 We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, 7 but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children." (1 Thessalonians 2:6-7 NIV)

In our evangelism we must be gentle and loving.

Peter said:

"15 But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 ¶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (1 Peter 3:15-16 NIV)

When we're being attacked we won't either un away or respond angrily if we've grown in the fruit of gentleness. Instead we will be controlled and wait for the proper timing. Proverbs tells us:

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1 NIV)

If we are gentle the tension will likely dissolve, but if we respond angrily it will be like pouring petrol on a fire.

Gentleness chooses the right response. If a strong response is called for it will be well thought out and appropriate – strength filled with tenderness.

What do we do when people criticise us? Do we go on the defensive or become angry. No. You may feel like snapping back, but instead you must control your feelings and words. Criticism is closely related to correction. The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about how we receive correction:

"He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honoured." (Proverbs 13:18 NIV)

and

"Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid." (Proverbs 12:1 NIV)

Children are to be obedient to their parents:

"Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord." (Colossians 3:20 NIV)

Proverbs 15:5 says:

"A fool spurns his father's discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence." (Proverbs 15:5 NIV)

Gentleness can be a part of even small children's lives. Their emotions and verbal responses can be under control through the turbulent teenage years. This will be helped if we have peace in the home:

"1 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:1-2 NIV)

Being gentle is not easy, we need to learn from Jesus:

“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. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Mt 11:29-30 NIV)

Jesus was anything but weak – remember the cleansing of the temple. He was totally in control of his life and his self discipline was extraordinary. Jesus tells us to learn from him, we all need to become more and more like Jesus. So be meek, be gentle, have power under control and a life that demonstrates balance in the way that you speak to and deal with people. We also need to listen to wise people:

“Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.” (Proverbs 13:10 NIV)

and even more to the word of God:

“21 humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. 22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.” (James 1:21-25 NIV).

Finally let me offer a few suggestions for cultivating gentleness and humility in our lives:

1. Spend time daily with the Bible, read and study it and think about it.
2. Daily submit your life to God’s control and influence, preferably several times a day.
3. Pray for others and become conscious of their needs and burdens and be willing to give practical help.
4. Put others first.
5. Test your thoughts and motives, try and act and think biblically.
6. Be slow in taking offence, but quick to acknowledge your own faults.
7. Learn to complement others and build them up. Don’t put them down.

Let us all be gentle. William Armitage wrote: “Gentleness is the richest ornament of a man or woman”