

Gentleness: Strength under Control

Various Passages

14 June 2020 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: What does it mean to be gentle?

Big Idea: We control our strength for the benefit of others.

Introduction

A long time ago now, I was in a discussion group with some other young, Christian men.

I don't remember exactly what topic we were talking about that night, but what I do remember vividly is a hypothetical scenario that came up.

The scenario was this: a pastor is addicted to pornography.

He spends his afternoons in his office at church looking at things on the internet that he shouldn't.

Seemingly unable to resist, he keeps returning to this sin again and again.

Finally, one day, he realises that he needs to go to his other elders to confess his sin.

The question for us was: if you were one of those elders, how would you respond?

I remember the first comment that anyone made.

Quick as a flash, one guy said something like this: "I'd immediately sack him from his position because a man who's sinning like that isn't fit for ministry.

"Then I'd be immediately starting the process of formal church discipline."

Let me be clear: there's no doubt that a pastor addicted to that sin – especially on church time – has a major moral failing.

A man like that's not qualified to serve as a under-shepherd of God's people.

But at the same time, as a bloke going into ministry, I found what this other group member said incredibly confronting.

Firstly, it helped me realise what a significant thing it is for a pastor to be so gripped by his sin that he will lose his ministry and possibly family.

By God's grace, may he help me never to go there.

What really shook me up though was the harshness of this brother's response.

He said all of this as if it was the final word on the matter.

There was no asking what was going on in the pastor's heart that would cause him to keep going back to his sin.

No offer of help to guide him towards holiness.

He was simply written off.

Yes, we were talking about a pastor but it also made me wonder how safe any church member would feel confessing the weakness and brokenness of their sin to a man who responds like that.

I'm not sure that I had the words to express it at the time, but what I was feeling was that my brother's response lacked gentleness.

He was rightly concerned about right and wrong, but I'm not so sure that he was really concerned about winning a brother back with gentleness.

His comments didn't sound like words from a sinner in need of grace to a sinner in need of grace.

It was only as I reflected on this conversation this week, that I realised what this actually revealed was a lot about my brother's heart.

Ironically, the way he answered actually showed that HE wasn't qualified to serve as an elder.

Outline

Our focus over the last eight weeks has been the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.

Following Jesus changes the way that we live.

Jesus said, "By their fruit you will recognize them."¹

In Galatians 5, Paul talks about 'works of the flesh' – things we do which express our sinful nature.

And he compares that with the Fruit of the Spirit which are something God does in us.

This fruit is characteristics that God's producing in us by the presence and power of his Holy Spirit.

As Christians who are walking in-step with the Spirit, our lives will display these virtues and mark us out as being different.

If my memory serves me correctly, Mark described goodness as the undervalued fruit.

I reckon that gentleness is probably the forgotten fruit.

When I think of the fruit of the Spirit, gentleness isn't the character trait that catches my attention.

In my mind, the focus is on the beginning of the list – love, joy, peace, patience – and then come all the "ness"es in the middle and gentleness is just one of those.

I confess that one of my first thoughts this week was that gentleness is something that it's difficult to get excited about.

I thought that maybe it's because this's the second last talk in a series, but then as I read more, I found out that I wasn't alone.

Just about everyone I read said that they'd started out the same way, but had also come to realise the importance of this fruit.

Gentleness isn't a trait that we take much pride in, probably because we simply don't pay it much attention.

I hope that this morning will be fruitful (please don't excuse the pun) as we spend some time thinking about gentleness.

The big idea is: **We control our strength for the benefit of others.**

We're going to look at three thoughts this morning:

- We all need gentleness
- Broken people need gentleness
- Opponents need gentleness

We all need gentleness

You can find references to being gentle throughout the Bible, though I suspect that we often miss them.

They don't really stand out and most of them are part of lists like Ephesians 4:2 or Colossians 3:12

For example Moses is described as being very gentle in Numbers 12:3.

Jesus was gentle and lowly in heart – Matthew 11:29.

And Paul tells Titus:

Titus 3:2 (NIV11) ² to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.

What is gentleness?

The Greek philosopher Aristotle helps us understand how the word was used around the time of Jesus.

He said that gentleness is the opposite of anger.²

Paul describes it as being the opposite of being violent.³

It's not being harsh, brash or domineering.

When I think of someone who's gentle, my mind first goes to someone with a certain kind of personality.

Someone who's warm, soft, quiet, nurturing and caring.

Take this how you will, when I think of 'gentle' I think of all the kind and caring people who go into the allied health field.

I know I'm peddling another stereotype and making a generalisation here, but if I'm honest, usually a woman.

I suspect that gentleness can be seen as something to be avoided rather than aspired to, especially if you're a bloke.

Gentleness sounds rather like being weak and feeble, not very manly.

We might associate gentleness with not being assertive, pathetic, a wimp.

Someone who's got no backbone.

We can easily buy into the idea that gentle people will be walked over in our world.

A gentle person can't get anywhere or get anything done.

As Coco Chanel once said:

"Gentleness doesn't get work done unless you happen to be a hen laying eggs."⁴

It's actually much easier to push other people around.

There are just so many benefits to it – it gets things done, it gets what you want, it saves time and effort.

But it's not the best way as Jesus said:

Matthew 5:5 (NIV11) ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

The gentleness word is used in that verse.

Most of us aren't naturally gentle.

Fighting, being "direct" or passive aggressive is usually our default, even if we're someone with a quiet personality.

We often say that we don't need to teach our kids to sin.

None of us needed to be taught to fight with our siblings and we know our kids don't either.

Just this morning, I had to break up a fight in our house.

I was told – seriously, you can't make this stuff up – "I hit her gently. I didn't mean to hurt her!"

Pauls gives us a list of anti-fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:20, which he calls 'acts of the flesh'.

While there's not a one-to-one connection between the fruit of the Spirit and acts of the flesh in verse 20, they can help us understand what the fruit AREN'T.

Gentleness is the opposite of 'fits of rage' and 'selfish ambition'.

But if we're Christians, if we're walking in step with the Spirit, we'll exhibit gentleness.

This isn't just something that belongs to a certain personality type.

It's a characteristic of our Lord and Saviour, as well as his followers.

I was challenged by the words of Dane Ortland:

"[G]entleness is essential to Christian living. It is not an add-on... It is not a gift of the Spirit for a few. It is the fruit of the Spirit for all."⁵

Gentleness isn't about being weak.

Actually, it's the total opposite.

It's having power and not looking like it.

Gentleness is a characteristic of people who use their power wisely by holding back for the benefit of another.

Gentleness is when the stronger restrain their strength for the sake of the weaker.

Here's the best definition of gentleness that I've been able to come up with:

Gentleness is using the least amount of force necessary to achieve godly aims.

Gentleness is strength under control, power that's channelled.

Rather than being weak, it means being strong, but using that strength in a controlled way.

In the ancient world it's the word that was used to describe taming wild animals.

It's having the power to serve others, not just using unbridled power for the sake of yourself.

I remember being in PE one day and we were doing a whole lot of tests of strength and agility.

There was a kid in my class at school who wasn't like a lot of the other boys in the class.

He wasn't known for being one of the tough guys who'd challenge for arm wrestles or pick fights with other people.

We did a strength test and a I remember a number of us being astounded when he absolutely blitzed the rest of the class.

He was strong, but you wouldn't know it because he kept his strength under control.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians about what he was like when he was with them.

As an apostle, he had the authority.

He could've thrown his weight around, but he didn't.

1 Thessalonians 2:6–7 (NIV11) ⁶ We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. ⁷ Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children,

Do you have power?

Perhaps with a child. An aging parent. People under you at work.

It might even be a kind of power that you don't even realise you have.

What kind of power and privilege do you have over people who are less educated, not as wealthy, from a different cultural background?

How do you use the power that you've got?

Do you use it for your own ends to get what you want, or do you hold back and channel it for the benefit of others?

The world says that we should remove an kind of difference in power.

That's a nice idea, but probably a little naïve.

God's answer is even more radical, more revolutionary.

Imagine what the world would be like if the people with power exercised it with gentleness?

You mightn't think that you can be gentle because you don't have much power.

At the very least, though, you have the power of how you'll respond to others.

When they upset or provoke you, will you respond with anger, or with gentleness?

As Christians, the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is the ability to display gentleness.

Broken People Need Gentleness

We should be gentle towards people who're broken.

One of the tricky things about these virtues is that Paul gives us a list without any explanation.

That makes it hard to know exactly what he had in mind.

The thing about gentleness though, is that we get a bit of an explanation over in chapter six of Galatians.

Galatians 6:1 (NIV11) ¹ Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

Here, you've got someone who's caught in sin.

The goal, Paul says, is to restore the person.

How do you do that?

We'll we all know that it's probably not going to be by yelling and screaming, ranting and raving at them.

If the goal is restoration – which it should always be – then we need to be as gentle as we can possibly be.

Sometimes when people sin, we just want to make ourselves feel better.

We can be tempted to to lay into them and tear them down so that we can build up our own self-righteous.

Broken people need gentleness rather than being broken more.

When you allow a toddler to hold a chick or a newborn baby, you'll almost always hear someone tell them to be gentle.

Gentleness is required when we're dealing with something fragile.

That could be a very fragile piece of glassware or crockery.

How much more important is it to deal carefully with another human being?

Gentleness is handling other people with care.

It comes from being tender hearted.

Driven by love, it's a desire to be gentle towards someone who's hurting and caring about one another's feelings.

That means that understanding their struggle and where they're coming from is absolutely key so that we can walk alongside them with gentleness.

God is our example in doing this.

When Jesus entered the world, there was an expectation that Messiah would come and rule with an iron fist.

He'd brandish the sword, defeat the pagan nations and bring peace and prosperity.

He would exercise judgment.

Instead, he walked alongside people.

They got a Messiah who healed the sick, gave sight to the blind and allowed the lame to walk.

A King who rode into the nation's capital city, riding on a donkey like a king in peace time:

Matthew 21:4–5 (NIV11) ⁴ This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵ "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' "

It shouldn't be surprising because Isaiah said that God's servant would come to help people who are broken and weak.

God's desire isn't to break people who're like a bruised reed – burdened and weighed down with your sin.

He doesn't kick you when you're down and he doesn't trample on people who're oppressed.

Jesus didn't come to snuff out people who were on their last legs.

Isaiah is quoted in Matthew 12:20:

Isaiah 42:3 (NIV11) ³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

No, instead he very deliberately went to the cross.

That's where his power was displayed as he used his power for the benefit of others.

Psalms 34:18 (NIV11) ¹⁸ The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

God doesn't crush us, he came to be crushed.

He lay down his life so that we could be saved.

Breathless, so that we could breathe again.

That's how God deals with sinners – with gentleness and understanding while he took a beating.

Jesus says that if you're broken, to come to him.

Come to him and he will give you rest.

Rest. Isn't that what we're all looking for?

Matthew 11:29 (NIV11) 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.

And we need to learn to do likewise.

Being gentle is like acting as a shepherd.

A shepherd uses all of his strength and his skill to look after the sheep.

Which is exactly what God has done for us.

Isaiah 40:11 (NIV11) ¹¹ He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

How could we – who are sinners – not do the same for other sinners?

Or, to use the words of Jesus, "Which of us can cast the first stone?"

Broken people need gentleness.

Opponents Need Gentleness

It's not just people who are broken who need gentleness though.

Finally, opponents need gentleness as well.

There are often times when I feel like I want to give people both barrels – in a very mature, adult way, of course.

Don't you particularly feel that with people who are opposing you?

Paul counsels his apprentice Timothy differently, especially as he deals with opponents of the gospel.

2 Timothy 2:25 (NIV11) ²⁵ Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth,

The proverbs wisely say that there's great strategic advantage in being gentle.

A gentle answer deescalates the situation and helps to bring calmness.

Proverbs 15:1 (NIV11) ¹ A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

We can absorb the adversity and criticism without lashing back and instead commit our cause to God.

One of the most effective ways of being gentle is to remember one simple word... 'stop'.

Stop and think whether your response – as emotionally charged as it might be – is gentle.

One simple question to add to our arsenal of the ones we ask ourselves is, “Am I being gentle?”

I hope there’s part of you that feels a little uncomfortable talking about gentleness like this.

It feels a little bit unbalanced – gentleness can sound like Jesus is asking you to sell out on truth, holiness and justice.

Isn’t there a place for being firm?

The answer is ‘yes’.

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey and then just a few verses later, we see him in the temple sorting out the people there.

And he has some choice descriptions for the scribes and Pharisees whom he calls ‘snakes’, ‘sons on hell’, ‘fools’ and ‘murderers’.

Paul has much the same thing to say about the Galatians at one point.⁶

Sometimes opponents need to be dealt with firmly.

This brings us to the second part of our definition – to achieve godly purposes.

Being gentle isn’t about being a pushover or someone who doesn’t have a voice.

It’s about being assertive about the right things at the right time.

Working for a godly outcome sometimes means standing up for what’s right and other times means saying absolutely nothing at all.

The goal is to be as gentle as possible, while still pursuing a godly outcome.

It’s pretty common now for people to talk about being assertive.

And I guess that it depends on what you mean by that.

As I understand it, being assertive is about standing up for yourself and your rights.

Jesus calls us to be assertive, but not self-assertive – standing for him, what we want to assert is his kingdom and his righteousness.

It intrigued me a few years ago when a Christian woman asked on Facebook whether anyone knew of assertiveness training for her son.

That struck me as being out-of-place when we follow a saviour who tells us to ‘turn the other cheek’.⁷

As Christians, we seek to stand less for ourselves and more for others.

The world tells us to be assertive. The word tells us to be gentle.

How do we know when we need to be gentler and when we need to be firmer?

That's not easy and it takes a great deal of wisdom.

Gentleness takes wisdom.

Again, James uses the gentle/meek/humble word in this verse:

James 3:13 (NIV11) ¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

Gentleness is an unnatural approach in many ways.

You could even say that it's a Spirit-empowered way of responding.

But it's a difference that's very winsome and attractive, and which will pay dividends.

There are some verses in 1 Peter that many of you are probably familiar with, but have you ever noticed the importance of gentleness in them?

Peter wrote:

1 Peter 3:15–17 (NIV11) ¹⁵ But in your hearts revere 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. ¹⁷ For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Not only should we have an answer ready, but we give the reason for our hope with gentleness and respect.

That's important, especially for those who oppose us.

Then they'll have no grounds for writing us off.

Our opponents need gentleness as well and the hope is that they'll be won over because of it.

Conclusion

Gentleness isn't just something that a few people express.

It's something that we should all do.

Gentleness is about controlling our strength for the benefit of others.

Gentleness is using the least amount of force necessary to achieve godly aims.

As we follow Jesus this week, may our lives echo the words of Paul to the Philippians:

Philippians 4:5 (NIV11) ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

¹ Matthew 7:16

² And the same holds good of our dispositions with regard to the appetites, and anger; some men become temperate and gentle, others profligate and irascible, by actually comporting themselves in one way or the other in relation to those passions. Aristotle Nic. Eth 2.1.7

³ 1 Timothy 3:3

⁴ Michael Jensen | October 11th and 2019 08:57 AM | 1 Add a Comment Comments, 'The Power of Gentleness - Eternity News', accessed 13 June 2020, <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/australia/the-power-of-gentleness/>, <https://www.eternitynews.com.au/australia/the-power-of-gentleness/>.

⁵ Dane Calvin Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life: Alive to the Beauty of God*, Theologians on the Christian Life (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 91.

⁶ Galatians 3:1

⁷ Matthew 5:39

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Big Question: What does it mean to be gentle?

Big Idea: We control our strength for the benefit of others.

Discussion Questions

1. Give an example of someone you know who's gentle? What makes them gentle?
2. Do you think that gentleness is the 'forgotten spiritual fruit'?
3. Why do we have a tendency not to value gentleness very highly?
4. Is your gentleness determined by your personality?
5. Why do broken people benefit from gentleness?
6. Why is giving an gentle answer so powerful?
7. How can the word 'stop' help us to be gentle?
8. How do we know when to be gentle and when to be firm?