

THE EVIDENCE OF GENTLENESS**GALATIANS 5:22-23**

At their school carnival, the Dunagin kids won four free goldfish, so out Dad Dunagin went Saturday morning to find an aquarium. The first few he priced ranged from \$40 to \$70. Then he spotted it right in the aisle: a discarded 10-gallon display tank, complete with gravel and filter for a mere five bucks. Sold! Of course, it was nasty dirty, but the savings made the two hours of clean-up a breeze. Those four new fish looked great in their new home, at least for the first day. But by Sunday one had died. Too bad, but three remained. Monday morning revealed a second casualty, and by Monday night a third goldfish had gone belly up. The Dunagins called in a friend who has a 30-gallon tank. It didn't take him long to discover the problem: the tank had been washed out with soap, an absolute no-no. The Dunagins uninformed efforts had destroyed the very lives they were trying to protect. Sometimes in our zeal to clean up our own lives or the lives of others, we unfortunately use "killer soaps" -- condemnation, criticism, nagging, fits of temper. We think we're doing the right thing, but our harsh, self-righteous treatment is more than they can bear. What's needed more than anything is a fruit of the Holy Spirit called gentleness.

If you're accused of being a Christian, what evidence will convict you? The evidence that you are truly a child of God is called the fruit of the Holy Spirit. We're on the homestretch in our study on this subject. Let's find the following passage in your Bible – Galatians 5:22-23 – but I want us to read those two verses in unison today. “But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!” (Gal 5:22-23 NLT)

Today, we consider the eighth in that list of nine – the spiritual fruit of gentleness. The Greek word behind the English translation has a very rich, diverse meaning. No one English word can really capture its full meaning. Some English translations use the word “meekness” while others use “humility.” I'm better able to understand what God means by this character quality by considering two Bible characters that were described as gentle, meek or humble. The first was Moses. The Bible says, “Now Moses was very humble—more humble than any other person on earth.” (Num. 12:3 NLT) The same word for “humble” in that verse is used for “gentleness” in Gal. 5:22. If you've read all the Bible stories about Moses, is that how you think of him? Moses killed an Egyptian for beating up a fellow Jew. Moses spent 40 years in the desert before God was ready to use him. Moses stood up to and argued with Pharaoh - perhaps the most powerful person in the world at that time. Moses had anger issues. Moses appears to have had a powerful and forceful personality. Gentle, meek and humble?

Jesus is another biblical example of gentleness. This is how He described Himself, “Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt. 11:29 NLT) Jesus turned over tables and threw business people out of the Temple. Jesus called

the Pharisees – the religious elite of His day and time – a bunch of snakes and whitewashed tombstones. Do you think of Jesus as being gentle, meek and humble? You may have heard that Bible scholars suggest that the biblical meaning of gentleness is actually power or strength under God's control at all times. In my preparation, I came across an interesting use of an acrostic that spells out the word "power." I believe it will help us get a handle on what the Bible means by gentleness and why this is so important to God.

P: YOUR PERSONALITY UNDER GOD'S CONTROL

Every person is a complicated combination of personal strengths and weaknesses. That's part of your personality. Each of us has wonderful traits and some rough edges, too. From your personality you send out a kind of force, an impact, an influence upon others. Sometimes it can be positive; at other times it can be negative. The Holy Spirit has no interest in changing your basic personality – that's God-given. Let's say that you're just a naturally aggressive, take charge, action oriented kind of person. Or, perhaps, you're just more mellow, reflective and laid back by temperament. All that's fine. The Holy Spirit is interested, regardless of your natural personality, in smoothing off every rough edge so that you produce or demonstrate gentleness.

Jesus gave two of His disciples, James and John (who happened to be brothers), the nickname "sons of thunder." I think that tells us something about their basic personalities. On one occasion, Jesus and His disciples didn't get a very friendly reception in one town they visited. In response, James and John asked Jesus, "... 'Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?'" (Lk 9:54 NLT) Jesus had to set them straight. Another disciple, Peter, was the living embodiment of a brash, impulsive, opinionated, strong personality. But the Holy Spirit did miracles in the lives of those men. James was the first disciple to die for his loyalty and allegiance to Jesus. John became a great leader among the first Christians and authored several books in the New Testament. When you read the Gospel of John, his three little letters or Revelation, you feel the gentleness, warmth, love and humility of the author. Peter, despite his many failures, became a man of gentle strength and great humility.

Have you ever consciously surrendered your personality to Jesus? God will help you keep what's good and kill off what's bad. Jesus saw the potential in James, John and Peter. He knew that if they would surrender their personalities to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit would work on those character defects so that each of them could have a powerful impact for Jesus. And that's exactly what happened. In the same way, God wants to shape you, mold you and develop you in such a way that your personal force, your personal impact, your personal influence comes wrapped up in His gentleness. What the Bible teaches should be true of every follower of Jesus needs to be true of you. "They must not slander anyone and must avoid quarreling. Instead, they should be gentle and show true humility to everyone." (Titus 3:2 NLT) That's not weakness. That's power under control.

O: YOUR OUTLOOK UNDER GOD'S CONTROL

When you give the Holy Spirit permission to shape your personality, your outlook will change. Your outlook on life, on what's important, on other people – it will all change. Each of us is self-centered by nature. That doesn't disappear the moment you trust Jesus as your Savior. In fact, it takes a lifetime of walking with the Lord for the Holy Spirit to get the job done. What job is that? To make you God-centered and other-centered. The Bible says, "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble (there's that word that can also mean meek or gentle), thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too." (Ph 2:3-4 NLT)

What happens when your outlook – your perspective – comes under God's control? Your outlook now is that you exist for God; God doesn't exist for you. Your outlook now is that your purpose in life is to serve God; God's purpose is not to make you happy. Your outlook now is that people have eternal value to God; they're not here just to help you get what you want out of life. A whole new outlook means that your spouse wasn't put on Planet Earth for you; you were put here for him or her. Your family wasn't put here for you; you were put here for your family. This church wasn't started 107 years ago to meet your spiritual needs; you were brought here to help this church reach this community for Jesus' sake. Do you see the change in outlook, in perspective? You see people differently. Your attitudes about and your actions towards them change. You start becoming caring and loving. You become approachable. You become understanding instead of demanding. When you live life from God's outlook, you gradually become humbler, meeker, gentler. There's nothing "namby-pamby" about it. This is power under God's control.

The power of this changed outlook is best seen in Jesus. Jesus is the best example ever of how a human being's outlook can be under the full control of the Holy Spirit. "Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross." (Ph 2:6-8 NLT) Jesus wasn't into self-fulfillment, self-realization or self-affirmation. His outlook is expressed in these words, "... 'My food is to do what God wants! He is the one who sent me, and I must finish the work that he gave me to do.'" (John 4:34 CEV) Power under God's control.

W: YOUR WORDS UNDER GOD'S CONTROL

What comes out of your mouth and mine demonstrates either gentleness or harshness. This might well be the area where each of us struggle the most when it comes to gentleness – keeping your tongue under God's control. The Bible is blunt when it comes to the tongue. "...Beasts, birds, reptiles and all kinds of sea-creatures can be, and in fact are, tamed by man, but no one can tame the human

tongue. It is an evil always liable to break out, and the poison it spreads is deadly. We use the tongue to bless our Father, God, and we use the same tongue to curse our fellow-men, who are all created in God's likeness. Blessing and curses come out of the same mouth...." (James 3:7-10 Phillips) Putting your tongue – your words – under God's control is a demonstration of gentleness. Is this really that big a deal to God? Yes! The Bible says, "...Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them." (Eph 4:29 NLT) That's a great test to apply to every word that comes out of your word and mine. Is it a good word? Is it a helpful word? Is it an encouraging word? If so, your words will be marked by gentleness.

Some 20 years ago, the crash of a commuter plane killed then Senator John Tower of Texas and 22 others. The investigation revealed an unbelievably small and seemingly insignificant cause for the accident. A harder, titanium-coated gear slowly wore down a softer gear engaged to it. The harder gear acted like a file over time and just wore down the teeth of the softer gear. Unfortunately, the gear that failed controlled the pitch of the left engine's propellers which caused the accident. Harsh, bitter, critical, judgmental words have the same effect over time: they wear down and break people's spirit.

Why is that that the people we claim to love the most - people in our family - end up bearing the biggest brunt of our harsh words? Hateful, angry, harsh words are like unleashing a demonic assault upon people we say we love and cherish the most. I can think of no more important place to exercise verbal tenderness than in your home. Husband, how do you speak to your wife? Wife, how do you speak to your husband? Dad and Mom, how do you speak to your kids? Kids, how do you speak to your parents? The Bible says simply, "Gentle words are a tree of life...." (Prov. 15:4 NLT) The ability to speak gently - to practice verbal tenderness – is one of the greatest demonstrations of power under God's control you will ever observe. Any fool can blow people away with a harsh word. It takes someone of considerable inner strength and power to put his or her tongue under the control of the Holy Spirit every waking moment.

E: YOUR EXPECTATIONS UNDER GOD'S CONTROL

If a person disappoints you – maybe your spouse, your kid, your parent, a close friend, someone at work or school, a fellow Christian – is your response gentle or judgmental? I've got expectations, you've got expectations, all God's children got expectations! What happens when people fail you? What happens when someone doesn't meet your expectations? No one is saying you shouldn't have expectations. No one is saying that when your expectations aren't met, that you should just ignore it or sweep it under the rug. No, the question is more about how you communicate your disappointment to the person who has let you down. Do you do it gently or harshly?

You can learn from biblical examples. One of the Old Testament prophets was a man by the name of Elijah. The most wonderful day in his life was when God enabled him to defeat 450 prophets of a false god named Baal. A great contest was held. Fire literally fell from Heaven. Elijah personally killed all 450 prophets who had corrupted the people of Israel by encouraging idolatry. The one, true, real God was vindicated. But when the queen – an evil woman named Jezebel – threatened Elijah’s life, he lost all of his confidence and headed for the hills. God finds him and tolerates Elijah’s pity party. “God, I’m the only one left who loves You and wants to serve You.” God leads Elijah to a remote place and there He reveals Himself through a gentle whisper. It’s a wonderful story of how God encourages, strengthens and builds up Elijah. The fact is that Elijah hadn’t met God’s expectations. His faith got tired and failed. He had lacked courage at a critical moment. He had turned tail and run for it when he should have trusted God and stood up to Jezebel. Despite all of that, God treated Elijah gently.

When you blow it and fail God, He isn’t waiting for you with clenched fists ready to blow you away. Instead, He’s waiting for you with open arms. When you’ve failed to meet God’s expectations, most often He whispers into your heart and mind the healing and restoration that you so need. Do you remember that Robert Redford movie, “Horse Whisperer”? He plays the part of this cowboy who has a special knack for working with traumatized horses. He just knows how to “gentle” them. In one scene, the horse gets so frightened by the ringing of a cell phone that he gallops off to the far end of the pasture. Redford just sits down in the pasture and waits for what seems like hours. The horse gets curious and inches closer and closer. Eventually, it allows Redford to touch him and take him back to his stall. God is kind of like that. He has a way of “gentling” you and me when we’re traumatized by life itself or by our own mistakes in life.

If God treats you and me like He did Elijah, how much more ought you and I be prepared to treat people with gentleness and tenderness when they screw up. Yes, even when they fail and don’t meet our expectations be it in the home, the office, the church, wherever. The Bible says, “Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.” (Gal 6:1 NLT) Bringing your expectations of others under God’s control will always result in gentleness. That’s powerful!

R: YOUR RESPONSES UNDER GOD’S CONTROL

That follows what we just observed about expectations. When people make you angry, how do you respond? When people make your blood boil, how do you react? Gentleness is proactive not reactive. Meaning what? When you just react to what other people say or do, you’re usually being controlled by other people. You surrender to your feelings at that moment. You refuse to take responsibility for your response. But a gentle person approaches it differently. Gentleness usually involves a decision in advance as to how you’re going to

respond to difficult people or difficult situations. Gentle people take responsibility for how they respond. You might say they are “response-able.” They invite God to control their responses. The Bible puts it like this, “Better to be patient than powerful; better to have self-control than to conquer a city.” (Prov. 16:32 NLT) It also says, “Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.” (Eph. 4:32 NLT) Those kind of responses don’t just happen naturally or automatically even for followers of Jesus indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Part of the spiritual fruit of gentleness is the proactive decision to respond gently when you could just react harshly.

How does the Holy Spirit work these fruits of His presence into your life and mine? For instance, how do you learn to express patience? By having to deal with exasperating people or circumstances. How do you learn to express goodness? By having your integrity tested. How do you learn to express joyfulness? By having to deal with people and situations that are a drag on your inner spirit. How do you learn to express gentleness? You don’t learn it on some spiritual playground. You learn it on a spiritual battlefield where you have to consciously choose gentleness, live into gentleness and ask God for His gentleness. Gentle people inspired by the Holy Spirit are certainly anything but wimps. Gentleness is the proactive decision to respond God’s way when you’re being sorely tempted to lash out with harshness and bitterness instead.

In an effort to teach his young son responsibility, a father required his son to phone home when he arrived at his friend's house a few blocks away. The boy began to forget, however, as he grew more confident in his ability to get there without encountering some kind of disaster. The first time he forgot, his dad called to be sure he’d arrived. Later, he told his son that the next time he forgot he’d have to forfeit his play time and come home. A few days later, the boy went to play with his friend again. The check in phone call was never made, however. Dad knew if his son was going to learn he’d have to be disciplined. But he didn’t want to punish him! Dad got out his phone, already regretting that his son’s great time would have to be spoiled by his lack of contact with his father. As he dialed, he prayed for wisdom. “Treat him like I treat you,” the Lord seemed to say. Dad let the phone at the other home ring once, but then he hung up. A few seconds later his phone rang, and it was his son. “I’m here, Dad!” “What took you so long to call?” Dad asked. “We started playing and I forgot. But Dad, I heard the phone ring once and I remembered.” “I’m glad you remembered,” Dad said. “Have fun.”

How often do we think of God as someone who waits to punish us when we step out of line? I wonder how often He rings hoping we will phone home. God is no wimp. Instead, you and I have the joy of knowing, loving and serving a God who is the essence of gentleness. God is absolute, unlimited power under absolute, loving control. And when His Holy Spirit is having His way in your life and mine, gentleness will be one inevitable result.