

## Try a Little Gentleness

Read: Philippians 4:2-9; James 3:13-18

Ever since New Year's beginning, we've been looking at the personality and character of the Holy Spirit through the lenses of the fruit of the Spirit. We've considered Jesus' teaching that you will know a tree by its fruit. The fruit of the Spirit is what is formed in us as we stay connected to Holy Spirit. As Holy Spirit is by nature, so we become like him in the various manifestations of the Spirit's character.

So far we have seen that the most important thing to know by experience is the fruit of love. Holy Spirit is loving in the same way that Jesus is loving. Holy Spirit loves sacrificially and slowly, meticulously teaching us to love in the same way. Opportunity after opportunity for us to lay down our lives in service of another are presented to us. Sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail. Holy Spirit never quits, never gives up, and never gets fed up with how slowly we learn. Holy Spirit is in it for the long haul. His work will only be done when we are fully sanctified and made perfect in the presence of God.

Holy Spirit is joyous, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, and faithful. So far we have looked into all these traits of Holy Spirit's personality and considered how each one should become formative of our own spiritual life. We have two more to go: gentleness and self-control. Today we will look at gentleness.

Let's start with the text from Isaiah we used in our call to worship. Isaiah was a prophet who endured the time of exile and who prophesied about the restoration of Israel. "See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." As someone who has suffered under imperial and cruel foreign rulers, one would expect Isaiah to continue with something like this: "Now they're going to get it! They are going to suffer double what they made us suffer. Get 'em God; make them pay!"

But that's not how Isaiah continues. He says, "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." The focus shifts from enemies to the beloved of

God. The answer to their suffering is not revenge but gentle care for the most vulnerable of creatures. If you know anything about shepherds and sheep, you know that sheep cannot be driven; they only know how to follow. A sheep is never expected to go where the shepherd does not go. The good shepherd is always out in front of his sheep, leading them into green pastures, beside still waters, in order to restore them with good food, still, crystal clear waters, and a safe place to lie down and rest.

Like Isaiah, Jesus worked in an environment of imperial domination of Israel, this time by Rome. Using the language of imperial rule, Jesus invites rather than commands people to come to him. He speaks of his yoke and his burden, things that people normally use to indicate oppression, but he unexpectedly couples them with gentleness and humility. We use them to institute the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-29. Jesus is holding up a contrast between his Father's kingdom based on gentleness and humility and the kingdoms of this world based upon harsh treatment and arrogant pride.

Maybe you've run across treatment stemming from the world's arrogant attitudes. I've heard stories of frustration, demeaning stories of experiences at the hands of officious bureaucrats at the DMV, or the welfare office, or in the hospital at the hands of medical personnel who handle suffering with contempt, or people in nursing homes whose growing incapacities are treated as nothing more than inconvenient irritants by those who are paid to serve. You might encounter harsh treatment in a supermarket checkout line or from your server in a local restaurant.

Maybe it doesn't happen often, but it does happen. And when it does happen we find ourselves on the threshold of conflict. It can happen in the world, and it can happen in the church too. When it does, how are you expected to respond as a Christian? Should we be people with a short fuse, always ready to

rise to the occasion and come out swinging? The counsel of scripture is that we respond with gentleness.

There are several Greek words used to convey the meaning of gentleness and not surprisingly there are also quite a few English words that flesh out the meaning. Gentleness and humility go hand in hand as we saw in Jesus words a minute ago: "I am gentle and humble in heart." Other words in the neighborhood are unassuming, considerate, forbearing, yielding, and pliant.

Let's take a glance at our text from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. The Philippian congregation was one of Paul's favorites if you go by the tenor of his letter to them. It is filled with love and joy and appreciation. But even so, in chapter 4 verse 2 we read: "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel..." Evidently it is entirely possible for two people of genuine Christian conviction to find themselves at odds. A few words later in verse 5 Paul writes "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."

I find it significant that gentleness is here tied to the nearness of the Lord. I recently spent an evening with a man who is a believer but isn't much of a church go-er who said, "I try to live my life as though he is watching me. I want to do what Jesus would expect of me in every situation." Not bad for a C and E Presbyterian. So much of our bad behavior tends to occur when we forget that the Lord is always near and always watching. Holy Spirit living in our hearts doesn't miss a thing!

The Apostle James in his teaching contrasting two kinds of wisdom ties gentleness to the wisdom from above. Listen as I re-read the passage from James 3:13-18:

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For*

*where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.*

It strikes me that the absence of gentleness denotes the presence of something else, of other things about us that do not please the Lord and of fruit not hanging on the right tree. Too many of us have learned to use harshness and anger to get our own way. Too many of us have not learned the art of sensitive listening and mutual respect for those around us. If gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit, if Holy Spirit is by nature gentle, should we not begin to exhibit that quality as well in our dealings with one another?

Finally, gentleness has a place in our dealings with the world that is often no friend of the Gospel. We are to be in the world but we are not of the world. How then shall we conduct ourselves? Paul, writing to his young protégé Titus to whom Paul entrusted pastoral responsibility for the Christian converts in Crete, wrote the following:

*Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone. For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*

A significant component of any gentleness that takes shape in us comes by remembering who we used to be ourselves before the grace of God arrested us for God's Kingdom. If you ever find arrogance and harshness asserting itself as you deal with troubling, troubled people, take a trip down memory lane and remember who you used to be, what you used to be like before you accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Holy Spirit took up residence in your heart. And

remember that you all to God's mercy who has worked transformation in your own heart. Your return to humility will join hands with the mandate upon all of us to bear the fruit of gentleness.

The Holy Spirit is gentle. Our Father is gentle. Our Savior is gentle. We don't often equate gentleness with strength, but it is so. Our Sovereign God is mighty enough to gently win over even those of us who are at first resistant. Perhaps the best loved anthem to the gentleness of God is Psalm 23:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside still waters; He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea though I walk through the valley in the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

Just as Jesus came among us as a helpless infant whom people were not afraid to approach and adore as we human beings are prone to do when we see a miniature human, and just as Jesus grew up to walk with constant compassion, in kindness and humility so that even the worst of sinners were drawn to him for mercy and forgiveness, so too Holy Spirit is magnetic in gentleness. Far too many people keep their distance from the Spirit because they are afraid that welcoming Holy Spirit will launch them out into a weird and confusing existence. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our gentle Spirit will lead us into all good things that God has prepared beforehand for those who love God.

Be a lover of God. Receive the Holy Spirit. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. Let the life of the risen Christ renew you from the inside out so that you will bear the fruit of gentleness in this world.

