

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 30, 2022

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT #8:
THE JEWEL OF GENTLENESS
1 Timothy 6:11-16**

This morning we resume our countdown of the nine varieties of the fruit of the Spirit named by the apostle Paul in Galatians 5. “The fruit of the Spirit,” he says, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Two weeks ago, we looked at #9: Self-Control. Today we’ll focus on #8, which I’m calling “The Jewel of Gentleness,” because, undervalued as it may be in the world today, the spiritual fruit of gentleness really is a jewel. It is a treasure to be, well, treasured and a source of immense blessing.

To get some biblical perspective on this spiritual jewel, let’s turn to 1 Timothy 6:11-16. Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s Word, because, as it says in the Westminster Confession of Faith, “(T)he Bible speaks authoritatively and so deserves to be believed and obeyed. Its authority does not depend on the testimony of any (person) or church but completely on God, its author, who is Himself truth. The Bible therefore is to be accepted as true, because it is the word of God (WCF 1.4). Indeed it is.

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BLESSED ARE THE MEEK?

Meekness is another word for gentleness. The word Paul uses in Galatians 5:23 for gentleness (*prautes*) has the same root as the word he uses in 1 Timothy 6:11 (*praupathian*). It is an easily misunderstood word, though. In fact, one of the least understood verses in the Bible comes from the lips of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, where He says: “Blessed are the meek (*hoi praeis*), for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5).

If we’re honest, we’ll admit that *meekness* is not our favorite word. Or one of our favorite concepts. One reason we don’t like the word is because when we hear *meekness*, what we think is *weakness*.

Sports coaches don’t inspire their teams by telling them to “go out there and be meek!” Generals don’t rally their troops for battle with a rousing appeal to meekness. Politicians don’t promise to lead with meekness. Business leaders don’t motivate their sales teams to pursue excellence by inspiring them to greater meekness. I don’t think I’ve ever seen or heard an advertisement for a seminar on meekness training. Have you? Meekness, it seems, is positively un-American. It is not the way we do things.

While Jesus says “Blessed are the meek,” the world today seems to say “Blessed are the aggressive, for they shall inherit the earth.” Blessed are those who do whatever it takes to get

what they want or where they want to go, regardless of who gets shoved aside or trampled in the process. Meekness is not the way to go if you want to get ahead. Or so it seems.

And yet, Jesus says: “Blessed are the meek...” Either we believe Him when He says that meekness is a desirable, even blessed quality, or we don’t.

MEEK, NOT WEAK

The problem is not with meekness. The problem is with us. The problem is with our understanding or, more to the point, our misunderstanding of meekness. The problem is in thinking that gentleness or meekness equals weakness. The problem is in thinking that anyone who is meek must be a wimp. But that is not what meekness is about. It is not what Paul means when he encourages us to cultivate the fruit of gentleness.

In addition to calling the meek blessed (Matthew 5:5), Jesus spoke of Himself as being “meek and lowly” (Matthew 11:29, KJV) or “gentle and humble in heart” (NIV). Jesus may be meek, but He sure isn’t weak! Gentle and humble in heart – yes; but definitely not a wimp! It is true that when Jesus was attacked, He didn’t retaliate. When He was mocked and spit upon, when they said cruel and hateful things about Him, He didn’t fight back, as we saw two weeks ago when we dissected the spiritual fruit of self-control. Not because He was weak, but because He was strong. Not because He was impotent, but because He kept His strength under control.

Was Jesus weak when He calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, causing His disciples to ask: “Who is this that even the winds and waves obey Him?” (Mark 4:41)?

Was Jesus a wimp when the devil took his best shots at Him in the desert, trying to get Jesus to give in to temptation? (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13)

Was Jesus a wimp when He exposed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and refused to be intimidated by their threats against Him? (Matthew 23)

Was He a wimp when, using a whip, He crashed the party of the moneychangers in the temple and threw them out? (Mark 11:15-17)

Was Jesus a weakling when He went to the cross and endured the literal hell of it for sinners like you and me?

The answer is intuitively obvious. Jesus was meek (gentle), but He certainly was not weak. Meekness does not equal weakness. It is anything but weakness. It does not mean cowardice or spinelessness. Jesus never said: “Blessed are the wimps.”

Though the word Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount and later in Matthew 11 of Himself is not easy to translate into English, the word that best conveys its meaning, as I have already suggested, is “gentle” or “gentleness.” Paul says it is one of the varieties of the fruit of the Holy Spirit – the fruit of a Christ-like character – that God desires us to cultivate with the help of the Holy Spirit.

(Did you catch the subtle [or not-so-subtle] reference to the Trinity there? *God the Father* wants us to manifest or incarnate the character of *Jesus the Son* with the help of *God the Holy Spirit*.)

This same quality is one of the virtues Paul urges his protégé Timothy to pursue in 1 Timothy 6:11, where he says: “But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness.” While this charge is addressed directly and personally to Timothy (“But you, man of God ...”), it is equally addressed to each of us as men of God, women of God, and children of God. Like Timothy, God is calling *you* and He is calling *me* to *flee* certain things and to *pursue* the qualities he lists here in verse 11.

The New Testament Greek word for “flee” is *pheugo*. We get the word “fugitive” from it. As followers of Jesus, we are to live, in a sense, as *fugitives* – not from justice, not from moral responsibility, and certainly not from God or fellowship with one another – but from the “all this” Paul wrote about in the preceding verses, in 1 Timothy 6:3-10.

What are the things we are to flee? Understand that this is not a complete list and is not intended to be. Paul’s focus here is on the necessity to flee from doctrinal errors of any and every kind, from dissensions and a divisive spirit, from ungodly attitudes and actions, and from the deadly trap of “the love of money” or greed, all of which can lead to unanticipated griefs and even spiritual ruin and destruction (6:3-10). These are not things to mess around with.

But fleeing is only part of Paul’s charge to Timothy in verse 11. The second part is to *pursue*. To pursue (*dioko*) means to follow hard after something. It is not something you do only when you feel like it. Think of an ice skater or swimmer or runner or whatever, pursuing a dream to make it to the Olympics and then to win Olympic gold. It is way more than a casual pursuit. It is serious business. It is something you give your life to. In the same way, Paul charges Timothy, and us as well, to give ourselves wholly to the pursuit of these spiritual qualities that reflect the presence and character of Jesus in us and the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

So, what Paul is saying here is that we are to pursue gentleness, along with righteousness, godliness, faith, love, and perseverance, with every ounce of energy we have. And we are to keep on pursuing it as long as we live. Do you see that?

STEEL AND VELVET

One way of looking at this quality of gentleness is to view it in terms of steel and velvet. Not one or the other but both and.

Carl Sandburg, the great American poet and biographer of Abraham Lincoln, used the words “steel and velvet” to describe Lincoln. This is a bit of what he said in a speech to Congress in 1959, on the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s birth:

“Not often in the story of mankind does a man arrive on earth who is both steel and velvet, who is as hard as rock and as soft as drifting fog, who holds in his heart and mind the paradox of terrible storm and peace unspeakable and perfect While the war winds howled, he insisted that the Mississippi was one river intended to belong to one country, that railroad connections from coast to coast must be pushed through

“While the war wavered and broke and came again, as generals failed and campaigns were lost, (Lincoln) held enough forces of the North together to raise new armies and supply them, until generals were found who would eventually win the war.

“In the mixed shame and blame of the immense wrongs of two crashing civilizations, often with nothing to say, (Lincoln) said nothing, slept not at all, and on occasions he was seen to weep in a way that made weeping appropriate, decent, [even] majestic.”

Steel and velvet. It is a powerful combination. It is the essence of true gentleness that is born of genuine humility and loving respect of others. Humility, in fact, is an indispensable part of gentleness.

If Lincoln displayed this combination of steel and velvet in some measure, the one who perfectly embodies these qualities, of course, is Jesus. He could be both strong as steel and soft as velvet. *At the same time.*

So, the opposite of gentleness or meekness is not weakness. The true opposite of gentleness is harshness or meanness or contentiousness. *The Message* describes gentleness as “not needing to force our way in life” (Galatians 5:23, MSG). A gentle person is not a combative person. That doesn’t mean a gentle person can’t or won’t stand and fight when it is necessary. Paul, in fact, himself no wilting wallflower, instructs Timothy in verse 12 to “fight the good fight of the faith.” Which is to say, there are some things worth fighting for, if you’re going to be true to the Lord Jesus in your pilgrimage in this world. There are times when you have to say, like Luther: “Here I stand.” But you don’t have to be mean or demeaning about it.

Aristotle, the philosopher, said that the Greek word for gentleness describes the perfect balance between unbridled anger and passive indifference (or apathy). It is a word that expresses the quality of strength under control.

John Wooden was one of the greatest college basketball coaches ever. His teams at UCLA won more national championships in men’s basketball than any other coach – 10 NCAA championships in a span of 12 years. From 1964-1975. I met him once. He came to speak at Grove City College when Mary Sue and I were students there. Among the life lessons Wooden passed on to others was this: “It takes strength on the inside to be gentle on the outside.” (Quote taken from Robert Morgan, *Worry Less, Live More*, 30.)

I like that. In fact, I think it’s biblical. True gentleness on the outside requires strength on the inside.

MUSCULAR CHRISTIANITY

One of my favorite movies of all time is *Chariots of Fire*, the 1981 movie that tells the stories of two very different men, Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams, and their pursuit of Olympic gold at the 1924 Paris Olympic Games.

I want to talk about Eric Liddell for a few minutes. He was a devout Scottish Christian, the son of missionaries to China, who was blessed by God with both tremendous speed and strength. “When I run,” he famously said, “I feel God’s pleasure.”

The movie chronicles his Olympic success and the courage of his Christian convictions (refusing to run a race on the Lord’s Day), but it doesn’t tell the rest of his story. It doesn’t tell us about his life and the hardships he endured after his Olympic triumph. Liddell left Scotland and went back to China in 1925 as a missionary with the London Missionary Society. He would spend the rest of his life in China, seeking to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

After the Japanese invaded China and World War 2 broke out, Liddell was classified as an “enemy national” and sent to a prison camp. He played a key role in meeting both physical and spiritual needs there. He organized athletic meets, taught hymns, and led Bible studies. But a few months before the war came to an end, in February 1945, just 20 years after his Olympic glory, Eric Liddell died in that prison camp of a brain tumor.

For the Glory is the title of a biography of Eric Liddell by Duncan Hamilton that I think some of you will find inspirational.

A boy who survived the prison camp later wrote of Liddell: “None of us will ever forget this man who was totally committed to putting God first, a man whose humble life combined muscular Christianity with radiant godliness.”

Wow! What a combination! Both muscular Christianity and radiant godliness. Both strength and humility. I think this is the essence of the gentleness that God desires us to cultivate with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Let me mention very briefly three areas where the Bible calls us to exhibit the spiritual fruit of gentleness.

OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD THE BIBLE

The first area of application might surprise you. It is more vertical than horizontal. It has to do with your attitude toward the Bible. Toward God’s Word. James uses the word for gentleness (*prautes*) in James 1:21, where he says: “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and *humbly accept* (with *gentleness*) the word planted in you, which can save you.”

What James has in mind is the spirit of humility with which we are to approach God’s Word, accepting its authority in our lives and submitting graciously to that authority, even when

what God says convicts us, confronts us with our sin, is contrary to the values of the world, reminds us of our responsibility as followers of Christ, or just makes us uncomfortable.

Do you have ears to hear what God has to say to you – to *us* – in His Word? James goes on to say that being *hearers* of the Word is not enough; we are to be *doers* of the Word as well. We are to put the message of the Bible into action. And we are to do it with this attitude of humility or gentleness that the Holy Spirit will help us to produce in our lives.

FELLOW BELIEVERS CAUGHT IN SIN

A second area where God wants us to exhibit the fruit of gentleness is in our attitude toward and relationships with Christian brothers or sisters who get caught in the web of sin. How should the church respond – how should *we* respond, how should *you* respond – when moral failure occurs in the life of a fellow believer? One option is to ignore it, to sweep it under the rug, to act as if it doesn't exist. That is not usually an effective strategy. Ignoring it will not lead to repentance, healing, or restoration.

Another option is to go public and expose it openly, regardless of who gets hurt or tarnished in the process. You can call a press conference and announce it to the world. Or you can gossip about it and still do a world of damage. Sometimes, in the case of a very public sin, it is necessary to deal with it publicly. But with the greatest care.

A third option, a *biblical* option, is what Paul advises in Galatians 6:1: “If someone is caught in a sin,” he says, “you who are spiritual should restore him (or her) . . .” How? “Gently.” With gentleness. “But watch yourself,” says Paul, “or you also may be tempted.”

When a sister or brother in Christ falls into some pattern of sin, we are to do what we can to correct and restore them, and we are to do it gently. Not with a sledgehammer but with humility and tenderness, recognizing that, however “spiritual” we may be (or think ourselves to be), none of us is immune to temptation, and it could happen to any of us.

If you know a fellow believer who is engaging in a pattern of sin, or who is heading down a dangerous road and playing with spiritual fire, do what you can, or invite another trusted brother or sister to join you, to reach out to that erring believer in the hope of restoring him or her to faith and fellowship and obedience to God's will. But do it with gentleness that is as strong as steel and as soft as velvet.

OUR WITNESS IN THE WORLD

The third area where God calls us to bear the fruit of gentleness is in our relationships to people who don't yet know Christ, whether they are interested, indifferent, or hostile. Our mandate is given in 1 Peter 3:15: “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 you have. But do this,” says Peter, “with *gentleness* and respect.”

What are we to do? First of all, we are to put Christ first. We are to gratefully and happily acknowledge Him as Lord in all our ways. And we are to be on the lookout for opportunities to share with others the difference He has made in our lives and the reason for the hope we have in Him.

How are we to do it? With winsomeness and humility. With gentleness and respect. We won't win a hearing for the gospel by yelling at people in anger. We won't attract people to Jesus by attacking them for their beliefs or lifestyle.

Or by attacking their politics, whether fellow believers or not, if their views happen to be different from ours. In these polarized days, we've got to be extra careful not to demonize people who hold political or social views that differ from ours. A spirit of winsome gentleness is often the most effective way to break down barriers and bring people together.

CONCLUSION

The fruit of the Spirit is gentleness. It is a spirit of humility that treats others with respect. It is meekness not weakness. It is as strong as steel and as soft as velvet. It takes strength on the inside to be gentle on the outside. This kind of gentle strength under control – strength under the control of the Holy Spirit – reflects the character of Jesus and brings joy to the heart of God, to whom be honor and glory forever.

May the jewel of gentleness be produced and expressed in your life and mine, to the glory and praise of God. Lord, let it be so. Amen.