

Gentleness is not a quality we are born with; we have to be taught gentleness. Think about it, children are ungraceful, grabby, and forceful. If they can, they will grab your hair, or your earrings, or your glasses, and when they do it usually doesn't feel very good. Have you ever seen a child pet an animal? More often than not, it starts out like a smack, and they might squeeze too hard or even grab tails. Now, they don't know what they're doing at first, they don't really have much control of themselves, so as they grow they have to be taught how to touch and pet gently, how not to grab, and how to be careful. Then they learn how to talk. Children don't tend to have filters, so they say whatever comes in their heads, which is okay at times but at other times can be very harsh. So, they have to be taught to be gentle in their speech.

But then as children get older and begin experiencing more of the realities of the world, they begin to realize that not everyone is as nice as mom and dad. So they start to toughen up. Kids can be unbelievable cruel; we've seen the effects of that recently, as the Triad community continues to mourn the loss of an 11 year old girl who committed suicide because of bullying. Unfortunately the world doesn't get any easier as we get older. As adults, sometimes it feels like we have to get tough and act hard in order to survive. This has never been so evident as our current election, in which we've not only seen the candidates beat each other up on national television, but we've beat each other up over our support of persons whom we probably don't completely agree with anyways.

So, we enter life hard and selfish, we learn to be gentle, but then the realities of living in the fallen world teach us that gentleness won't get us very far. All the while, we claim to worship a savior who John the Baptist describes in **John 1:29** as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." I have a hard time trying to imagine any gentler creature than a lamb.

So, if we as Christians are called to imitate Jesus, the Lamb of God, then we need to relearn gentleness. This morning we are going to consider three things. First, what is Biblical gentleness? Second, why are we called to be gentle? And third, what sins stand in the way of gentleness?

A) What is Biblical Gentleness?

The word we translate as "gentleness" has the same root word as "meek" as found in Matthew 5:5:

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

William Barclay expands this verse, saying: “Blessed are those who have the humility to know their own ignorance, their own weakness, and their own need.” Gentleness starts in recognizing our own shortcomings. And when we truly see our shortcomings, then we can understand and appreciate the grace God gives to us in spite of those shortcomings. And when we appreciate the grace God gives us in spite of our shortcomings, then we can extend to others the same grace.

Another way to understand “gentleness” is looking at its Greek root “Praus” which is sometimes used to describe a domesticated animal, trained to obey commands and used to being under reins.

Before we come to Christ, we are like wild, unbridled horses. We have the freedom to do what we want, sure, but we have no purpose, direction, or protection. When we come to Christ, we are brought into his keeping, he is able to tame our sinful spirits, and we are able to be useful to God and to others.

John Drescher writes that “Meekness is an attitude toward God which manifests itself in gentleness toward others...It is love which seeks first not its own but the things of God and others.”

Transition: Gentleness is a position of humility towards God and towards others that only comes from a life dwelling firmly in the Spirit. Why, though, should we seek to be gentle or meek, when we know that the world rewards toughness and boldness?

B) Why should we be gentle?

1) Jesus called us to learn from his gentleness:

Matthew 11:28-29

²⁸“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, 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.*

Typical teaching on these verses focus on the comfort of finding rest in Jesus, which should absolutely be considered as verses of comfort. But in that rest, we aren’t being called to nothingness. Jesus says to take on his yoke and learn. A yoke is a wooden cross piece that linked oxen together for work. To take on a

yoke means to submit to the will of the one driving the plow. To take on Jesus' yoke is to be driven by humility and to act in gentleness.

Transition: Not only are we called to submit to Jesus' yoke and learn, but we are also called to imitate Him in action.

2) We are called to imitate his gentleness:

John Gill calls Jesus our "example and pattern" for gentleness, saying that it happens "in walking humbly with God, acknowledging every favor, being thankful for every blessing, and depending on his grace, and in behaving with modesty and humility among men."

So, what does it look like, practically, to imitate Jesus' gentility? In our Scripture for this morning, Paul gives us several adjustments we can make in attitude in order to be more like Christ in the way that we relate to God and to others. I'm going to read this time from *The Message* because I think the language Peterson uses here gets to the heart of Paul's message.

Philippians 2:1-8 (The Message)

2¹⁻⁴ If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you *care*— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

5-8 Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became *human!* Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

There are two important points that Paul makes in what it means to imitate Christ.

a. *Be Like-Minded with Christ*: See others the way Jesus would see them, beloved children of God in need of mercy and grace. Paul tells us to “have the same love.” Will this happen overnight? Christian discipleship is a journey and heart transformation takes time. But every time we can look into the eyes of somebody different than us and see the image of God, we come one step closer to true Christlikeness.

b. *Hold others in higher-esteem*: From birth, we are naturally inclined to serve our own needs first. Babies cry when they are hungry, no matter what time of day or night, regardless of their parents’ level of sleep or rest. And though we may become more considerate as we get older, our first instinct is selfishness. Christians are called to be counter-cultural in putting others ahead of ourselves. Paul tells us to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain deceit. Now, if our natural inclination is selfishness, how then do we do this? We need to start living intentionally, being mindful of the way we think about and treat others. If selfishness is our first instinct, then we have to work at unselfishness. If we can take the time to really consider others the way Jesus does, then we can start to imitate Christ in the way he sees and treats the world.

Transition: If gentleness is a position of humility towards God and towards others that only comes from a life dwelling firmly in the Spirit, and we learn that gentleness from imitating Christ, which calls for us to see others like Christ sees them and value others more than ourselves, what are the sins that prevent us from gentleness?

C) What sins prevent us from gentleness?

In Galatians 5 which is the theme passage for this sermon series, Paul gives a list of sins that he calls “acts of the flesh” which are those things opposite of the fruits of the Spirit. When looking at these, we often focus on sexual immorality and drunkenness as the really obvious sins to avoid, but he also includes some pretty serious sins that really inhibit our ability to live gently.

Galatians 5:19-25

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”

So, what are the sins that Paul includes here that steal us away from gentleness?

There are five that are feelings we have as individuals that can cause us to treat each other harshly:

-hatred

-envy: wanting what someone else has

-jealousy: fear that someone else will take what you have

-fits of rage: an angry personality who is easily set off

-selfish ambition: wanting to get ahead, not for what it could do for your family or for your business, but simply what it can do for you.

Then there are three he lists that cause us corporately, or as a group, to turn away from gentleness, treating each other harshly. Interestingly enough, they are almost sequential in how they happen:

-dissension-Disagreement that leads to discord; not just disagreements, but disagreements that are so strong that they cause conflict and disharmony.

-discord (conflict, disharmony)

-faction- a small, organized, dissenting group within a larger one

I would say that the biggest sins that churches and Christians in our nation are guilty of right now are dissension, discord, and factions. We see it everywhere, believers fighting with one another, dividing, and forming new groups. These sins are like cancer cells, splitting, and splitting, and taking over the body of Christ and making it sick. We disguise these sins as seeking rightness and holiness, which we certainly are called to. But we need to recognize when our drive for righteousness becomes sinful in causing dissension, discord, and factions because we stop seeing others through the eyes of Jesus and instead we see them through the eyes of our sinful hearts.

Conclusion:

So, we've determined that gentleness is a position of humility towards God and towards others that comes from imitating Christ, which means that we need to see others like Christ sees them and value others more than ourselves. In order to be gentle, then, we need to allow the Spirit of God to fill us rather than the Spirit of the world, which demands that we come first.

What happens, then, if we don't, as individuals and as a church, seek to approach the world with the gentleness of Jesus? Aesop tells a fable that warns us of the consequences of continuing to live selfishly and harshly:

"Father," said a little Frog, "I have seen such a terrible monster! It was as big as a mountain, with horns on its head, and a long tail, and it had hoofs divided in two." "Tush, child," said the old Frog, "that was only Farmer White's Ox. It isn't so big either; he may be a little bit taller than I, but I could easily make myself quite as broad; just you see." So he blew himself out, and blew himself out, and blew himself out. "Was he as big as that?" asked he. "Oh, much bigger than that," said the young Frog. Again the old one blew himself out, and asked the young one if the Ox was as big as that. "Bigger, father, bigger," was the reply. So the Frog took a deep breath, and blew and blew and blew, and swelled and swelled and swelled; and said: "I'm sure the Ox is not as big as that." At this moment he burst.

Sin compels us to want to be bigger and better than everyone around us. We learn we need to be hard and harsh not let ourselves get pushed around in order to succeed, and so we develop strategies and coping mechanisms to deal with people when we are being treated unfairly. As Christians, we want to defend what we know is right, but oftentimes in the process we end up treating others unkindly, which is just as sinful as the thing that we are condemning. As a church, how we act towards the outside world matters because it tells others about the character of Christ.

Right now, I believe that we have a lot of repenting to do for the ways that we as Christians have treated others. I think that Christians are one of the biggest reasons why the unbelieving world aren't coming to Christ because, although we are called to imitate a gentle savior, we act as if he is a harsh master, a judge more interested in condemnation than mercy, the law than grace, hell than salvation. Gandhi is famously quoted as saying: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." If we want to be the gospel to the world, then we need to re-learn gentleness. We need to allow the

Spirit to transform our hearts from selfishness to selflessness and respond to God's gentleness with gentleness towards others.