

Godly strength always begins with gentleness. It is a characteristic mark of the Holy Spirit, for it is a characteristic mark of Jesus, and therefore is a quality of our spirits that we ought to be seeing transforming our hearts, minds, actions, and words. It is a quality that must be growing within all Christians and a defining mark of strength and any leadership that is worth following. In fact, I would go so far as to say that any so-called leader who lacks gentleness should not be in a position of power or authority at all, which is why one of the character requirements for an elder in the church mentioned in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 is one who is not a ‘bully’, but who is gentle. Those who abuse their authority and bully others are unfit for leadership in the church.

Now, if I asked you to define gentleness for me, how would you define it? What does it look like? How do you know when somebody is being gentle? How do you know when someone is not being gentle?

Gentleness is really the way in which we relate to another with less power than us, or less perceived power than us. It is the stronger moving toward the weaker, the authority relating to the subject, the powerful to the powerless. Put yourself in a situation where you are the weaker one, where someone has authority over you (boss, teacher, parent, judge, police officer, etc.) How do you want to be treated? How does it feel when others treat you harshly? Now put yourself in the powerful position with another (little brother/sister, employee, child, weaker friend who has failed again). How do you treat them? How do you treat them when they have wronged you for the 77th time? Can you be described as gentle, *especially when you are right*? How do you know?

These are the kinds of questions which get to the heart of whether or not we are wearing the attire suitable for those united to Christ Jesus. And, as those who have received the call of the Lord to come to Him when we are weary, because He is humble and gentle, so we learn from one whose heart is compassionate, whose intentions are kind, whose self-appreciation is humble, and whose actions towards us are gentle. It is interesting that for those of us who have come to Jesus, who have been confronted by Him, we come away from such a confrontation feeling cared for, even while being corrected and exposed and challenged to repent. Why is this? How can being confronted by holiness not drive us to terror, but rather draw us closer to the burning revelation of His justice? Because He is gentle with us.

Therefore, if we are to dress like Him, then we need to evaluate what this gentleness really is, what it is not, and how we are to throw off the old ways of control through power and instead put on the new clothes of power expressed in love. Let's take a look.

First of all, I'm going to do things a bit backwards from how we've done them the past few weeks. Rather than start with what gentleness is not, I'd like to start with what gentleness is. What is gentleness?

Gentleness is the heart of compassion expressing itself in word and deed. It is *how we speak* and *how we move*. It is our tone of voice, our body position, the external communications of the heart that is compassionate and kind, and whose self-assessment is humble. In other words, when our hearts are compassionate towards

another, our words and bodies convey kindness. This is the gentleness. When our self-assessment is not one of superiority, but of the lower rank, then our words and bodies convey respect and honor towards another. This is gentleness.

Gentleness speaks kindly, softly, and under control towards those who are weaker than us, less powerful than us, or who are under our authority. Gentleness is almost always expressed most poignantly from a position of authority, power, or righteousness, which is why I asked about how we treat people when we are right. We may not always have positions of authority or power with people, but there are many times when we believe that we are right and another person is wrong, and how we treat those whom we have concluded to be wrong speaks loads about whether or not are dressed appropriately in the virtues of Christ Jesus.

Look at how the Scriptures describe Jesus in Isaiah 42: “He will not yell or raise His voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not snuff out...” That is the quality of gentleness. When it is dealing with a bruised reed or a person whose flame is faltering in the winds of the world, of suffering, of shame, of despair, it does not come on so strongly as to snuff it out and remove all hope.

Jesus invited us to join Him in His work and to learn from Him, and the reason which He gave to make this such a clearly wise choice is that, “I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt 11:29)

You see, gentleness is the opposite of seizing control by a force of power or strength.

Rather, it is using one’s strength, one’s power, one’s authority, to meet another person at their point of weakness, *in order to benefit them*. To build them up. To help them

rest. To encourage them towards holiness and towards life and towards flourishing and the ceasing of the busyness of the soul and the incessant inner turmoil of striving to prove that I am somebody because I am good.

Gentleness is the ability to listen to others without overpowering them. Gentleness is most often seen through people's eyes and body language and moves to their words. The eyes are soft and tender, attentive and concerned. The entire body pauses to listen, fully absorbing the full situation of another person. It does not speak quickly, but slowly, seeking to understand not only their context and the circumstance of the person, but the heart within, the hopes and fears, anxieties and pieties. Moved by compassion and kindness, gentleness moves slowly, humbly, deliberately, selflessly, until all the focus is upon the other, trusting that the Lord has the best yet to come.

Gentleness is the ability to listen to others and speak to others without overpowering them, without force, without shutting them down, and without disdain or disgust, either explicitly expressed or implied by body language (rolled eyes, sharp exhales or snorts, etc.). You know the kind of responses.

This is why humility immediately precedes the garment of gentleness. It is humility which remembers its own weaknesses and its own failures and limitations and needs as it speaks. Jesus was very clear when he told us not to be hypocrites when we endeavor to help our weak friends. **“Why do you see the speck of dust that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, “Here, let me take that speck of dust out of your eye’ when there is a log in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will**

be able to see clearly to help take the speck of dust out of your brother's eye.” (Matt 7:3-5)

The apostle Paul uses this teaching to instruct the Galatians. After instructing them of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, those attitudes and virtues which God is producing in His children, he immediately goes to how we are to correct one another. That is, when we are right and our brother is wrong, this is how you handle it: with gentleness!

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. And beware about yourself, or you, too, will be tempted. Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. For, if a man things himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” (Gal 6:1-3)

It is in a spirit of gentleness that we are to address the transgressions of a brother who is trapped in it. He is stuck. He is not loving it, but is stuck in it. He is not refusing to acknowledge it, but in seeing it struggles to get free. For those brothers, we are to bear their burdens with them, struggle alongside them in gentleness, never giving up, and watching out because we, too, can fall. We, too, are capable of becoming ensnared by a lie and a lust. Therefore, humility always recognizes its own weakness as it approaches a brother who is weak.

Jonathan Edwards writes quite strongly about those who take the name Christian, but whose hearts, words, and actions, are characterized by selfishness and arrogance and divisiveness. He says in his work, *Faith Beyond Feelings*, **“Of course, even true Christians still have remnants of a contrary spirit and may even be guilty of behavior offensive to such a spirit [of compassion]. But this I affirm, there are no true Christians who live in the prevailing power of such a spirit so that it becomes truly their**

character. The Scripture speaks of no real Christian who has an ugly, selfish, angry, and contentious spirit. Nothing can be more contradictory than a morose, hard, closed, and spiteful Christian.”

Now, this, then, begs the question: “Is it gentle to make people feel bad?” Well, I would say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ There, doesn’t that help? What I mean is that there is a way to “make” people feel bad because you are being a jerk. However, there is also a way in which the truth itself leads people who reject it to feel judged by it, and if they are unwilling to humble themselves to learn from Christ, then they do not find rest for their souls, but their souls will be agitated and irritated by the revelation of the truth, even when it is spoken with gentleness. In this case, then, it is not the gentleness which makes people feel bad, but the truth itself. Gentleness is the manner of delivery, not the message, and to confuse the two troubles many of us.

This, of course, leads us to our second point. **What is gentleness not?**

Like the other clothes of Christ, gentleness is not fearful silence. Often we confuse gentleness with timidity. Timidity is not gentleness, for it does not care about building up another person, it is only concerned with how it feels, how it is treated, how it may suffer. But, gentleness is not softness out of fear. Gentleness speaks without fear, but always in control. We see Jesus.

Did he disagree with people? Yes. Did he speak very hard and unbending words towards those who were harming others, i.e. the Pharisees and Sadducees, in no terms of uncertainty at all? Yes. But, what he didn’t do was yell and scream and rage at them. He refused to give them ground, but he did so with gentleness. He called them

to account for how they taught and how they lived and how they treated others, but he did so without rage or the need to seize control and prove that he was right by brute volume.

Did Jesus get angry? Yes. In Mark chapter 3 Jesus entered a synagogue and saw a man with a withered hand, made powerless by an infirmity which rendered one of his limbs useless. And we are told that others were watching to see if he would heal the man on the Sabbath so that they might accuse him and be rid of him, to prove that he didn't care for God or speak for God. Now, this ambush means that they probably brought the man into the synagogue and placed him in a visible location. They didn't care for the man. They were using the man for shameful political gain, to gain more power. They treated the man like a tool, an object. And Jesus? He looked at the man. He looked him in the eyes and he saw...a man. And he called him over to himself. He treated him with respect, with dignity, with gentleness. Then, he asked those around, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" And they refused to answer him. And how did Jesus respond to them? Mark said that he looked around at them "with anger, being deeply grieved at the hardness of their hearts," and then he healed the man. He treated the weak one, the humbled one, with gentleness, but he looked upon the hardened hearts of those users of men, those abusers and bullies, with a mixture of anger and grief. He even turned over tables and drove people out of the temple with a whip that he made himself just for the purpose. So, how is this gentleness? Well, it is not. At least not to the moneychangers. But it was gentle to the Gentiles. You see, the moneychangers had set up shop in the court of the Gentiles. Here's the issue with Jesus. **Jesus got angry when other people were being**

harmed. Jesus is gentle when He is being harmed. We typically get that backwards.

We are gentle when other people are being harmed, but we get most angry when somebody harms us.

So, there are times to be righteously angry, and those times are when other people are being harmed by others, when they are being kept from the Lord's kindnesses by arrogant and hard-hearted people. When Jesus himself was being threatened, he did not utter a threat in return, but left it up to His Father to avenge him. He told the Pharisees 'no', and he refused to obey people when they told him to do things which His Father had not, and when he was beaten by the Temple guard, he did not call down 10 legions of angels to defend him, though He could have, but instead issued a simple question of righteousness, "Is it right and lawful for you to strike me?" He questioned justice publicly, and raised the issue of injustice without concern for his own skin, but he did so with gentleness even to those who were actively beating him unjustly. Yet, He told the truth in the light, letting others evaluate his claims. He kept things in the light and did not allow them to remain in the darkness, but he did so with calm and reasoned righteousness. That, my friends, is the gentleness of Jesus. Speaking words of truth under control, never domineering, but proving by example and by word, just as he commanded His followers to do when they had power and strength. **Gentleness is not silence when others are being harmed, and it speaks the hard truth *for the purpose of building others up*, not merely to express its own anger or grief.**

Gentleness is also not efficient. It is slow and it waits long. There is a reason that patience follows closely behind gentleness in this clothing list. Tolerance, bearing up

with others' weaknesses and failures. Gentleness endures and tolerates the stilted, jittery path of change in others. Because the truth is that when you love other sinners, and when you confront them, even with gentleness, it is often true that their response will be sinful and will spill all over on those who are trying to help them.

For example, when you gently correct your child about his outbursts of anger towards his sister, it shouldn't be a surprise if he bursts out in anger against you. If you have an employee who has a pattern of demeaning other people behind their back, and you gently call him to change, you shouldn't be surprised when you discover that he has made up some stories about you behind your back. Gentleness requires tolerance and patience and is unwilling to lose its cool when it is sinned against. It takes a long time. This is why Paul describes love as "never giving up" in 1 Corinthians 13.

Finally, gentleness is not weakness. Rather, it is power under the control of love. It refuses to seek its own glory and instead seeks to glorify others. Like compassion and kindness and humility, it realizes that this moment, this one right here, is not about me. It is about Christ meeting my brother where he is and my sister seeing her Redeemer and her Redeemer and the Lord as her Lord.

It takes a lot of strength to be humble, a lot of endurance to love well. The gentleness of God drove Him to a cross, to bear shame that wasn't his to die a death which he did not owe and could have avoided. Gentleness is not weakness.

But look what gentleness can do! Proverbs 15:4 says, "A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but a crooked tongue crushes a spirit." Gentleness produces life, flourishing, growth,

sustenance, the fullness of the heart in another person. It is a life-giving tree which sustains others.

Proverbs 15:1 states, “A gentle response turns away anger, but a harsh word stirs up wrath.” Gentleness creates community, the calm of fellowship, while harshness and hardness invites division and insecurity in relationships. It knocks out the pegs of self-righteousness and competition, of comparison and the heart’s vacuous need to triumph over others.

Though gentleness is calm and controlled, slow and patient, soft and pliable, we are told that it is the power behind repentance. Rather than the explosive power of anger or coercion, Paul told Timothy that gentleness is the means that God’s servants are to use when opposed.

“The Lord’s servant must not engage in heated disputes, but must be kind to all, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness. Perhaps God will grant them repentance and then knowledge of the truth, and they will come to their senses and escape the devil’s trap where they are held captive to do his will.” (2 Tim 2:24-26)

The purpose of wrath is merely revelatory. That is, all it intends to do is *reveal* sin. It does not intend, nor can it, *redeem* it. **But the purpose of kindness and gentleness is redemption, not mere revelation.** When we respond with wrath and force, with raised voices and the desire to control another person, is not the point simply to show somebody how wrong that they are? But, when we respond with truth and love, kindly and gently, it is because our purpose is not merely about the fact of righteousness or

injustice, but the desire to actually see the person change and grow and flourish in the light of the truth. The desire of gentleness is always redemption.

So, what can gentleness do? It brings life. It builds community and fellowship. It leads to repentance and knowledge of the truth. It is redemptive. Gentleness is a fruit of God's Holy Spirit. What can it NOT do?

So, the question for us is simple: Do I trust the Spirit of God enough to humble myself and speak to those less powerful than me or those who oppose me with gentleness instead of wrath?

And if I am to put on these clothes of gentleness, how do I find the power to do so?

First, you must pursue it. You must set your mind on it. You must resolve to put it on. Paul told Timothy, his young friend, "But you, as a person dedicated to God, keep away from all that [love of money]. Instead pursue righteousness, godliness, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness." (1 Tim. 6:11) We must set our minds on such things as our pursuit. Growth doesn't just happen, nor are we passive in the putting on of such clothes. We are all pursuing something, putting some kind of affections, activities, and speech on in order to relate to others. The question isn't whether or not we are dressed, it's what are we wearing? Pursue gentleness with fervor and fight the good fight of faith against using our strength selfishly to serve ourselves.

Secondly, remember your union with Jesus, the Son of God through whom all things that were made have been made. You and I must fix our attention on the quality of the One upon whom we entrust ourselves. He is not feeble. He does not fail. He is not a partial Savior, but a whole one. He is the Rock who holds up our entire edifice,

capable, no, absolute in His ability to deliver on all that He promises. We must see Jesus as Jesus is, and entrust our lives and reputations and honor and belonging to Him.

When we forget this, even partially, feeling that Jesus isn't enough, then we will feel compelled to receive honor from others, to triumph over our enemies in order to prove ourselves as worthy of belonging. You see, we cease to be gentle because we cease to entrust our story to Christ Jesus' hold upon us for all of these things. We erroneously believe that we must make things right, that we must obtain the transformation of others, that it is up to us, and too often we assume that our wrath and anger and sheer force of volume will bring it about. No, that is simply unbelief in the gospel for ourselves and for others.

Thirdly, in seeing the quality of our Savior, we must remember His cross. We must remember what gentleness of God has been shown towards us, who were obstinate enemies of God, haters of His Son, and rebels with mutinous intentions upon his kingdom. We must remember this in order to remain humble and to remind ourselves that it was not God's wrath that opened our hearts, but His love. It was not the hammer of His anger which broke our hearts, but the warming sun of His gentleness which melted it. He redeemed us by giving His own life for us. He bore up the wrath of God towards our sin so that God shows us gentleness.

Therefore, we have died to anger and wrath as a means of trying to gain redemption. And we live with Christ, resting in His finished work to present us holy, blameless, and beyond reproach. Shall we consider it any different for those who are acting like our enemies?

What we will find is that if we want our hearts warmed towards others instead of hardened and cold, then we must sit at the fire of God's mercy towards us in Christ Jesus. We must behold the gospel of our unearned belonging. We must appreciate the eternal significance of the cross for us and of the gracious new life that God has granted to us according to His kindness alone.

Walter Marshall shows us this pathway of motivation, and I think that his words are superior to mine, so I simply want to read them to you, hoping that in them you may hear the "how" you can grow, not only in gentleness, but in all the virtues suitable to our belonging to God through Christ Jesus.

"He makes us first to be in Christ by faith, as branches in the vine, that we may bring forth much fruit (John 15:4-5). He first purges our consciences from dead works by justification, that we may serve the living God (Heb. 9:14). He makes us to first live in the Spirit, then walk in the Spirit (Gal 5:25)....Now, mark well the great advantages you have for the attainment of holiness, by seeking it in a right gospel order. You will have the advantage of the love God manifested toward you, in forgiving your sins, receiving you into favor, and giving you the spirit of adoption, and the hope of His glory, freely, through Christ, to persuade and constrain you, by sweet allurements, to love God again, who has so dearly loved you, and to love others for His sake, and to give up yourselves to the obedience of all His commands out of hearty love to Him." ~Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*