The Fruit of the Spirit: Gentleness  
Galatians 5:23  
August 17, 2014

- One of the defining traits of fallen humanity is weakness.
  - Nearly every story exploits the reality that everyone suffers from weakness. The ancient story of Achilles, for example, has been used for centuries to remind us that even the strongest warrior can be brought low because he has a weakness.
  - People are weak in many different ways.
    - Physically weak. Children, the sick and infirm, others who are physically weaker than you.
    - Emotionally weak. People who have just lost a loved one, for example, are often emotionally weak. Many times those who are sick are emotionally weak and can be preyed upon by evil men who are out to take advantage with promises of cures for diseases, etc. Some people are emotionally weak by constitution; it's an ongoing struggle.
    - Spiritually weak. People enduring trials can be spiritually weak. People who are under severe temptation. Christians who do not know the Word are spiritually weak.
    - There are other ways people manifest weakness in their lives as well.
  - The reality of weakness magnifies the importance of gentleness.
    - Paul notes in verse 23 that the fruit of the Spirit is gentleness.
    - As we saw when we began this study, each aspect of the Spirit's fruit is important. If even one is missing, the fruit is defective. Gentleness, then, is vital. It is not an optional aspect of Christianity. It is an integral and organic part of the fruit of the Spirit.
  - Despite this, gentleness is one Christian virtue that is rarely discussed.
    - The 19th century preacher George Bethune wrote, “Perhaps no grace is less prayed for or less cultivated than gentleness.”
    - It’s easy to understand why. In our pride, we are often out to protect ourselves. Self-protection and defensiveness are enemies of gentleness.
    - Moreover, in the world, weakness is often exploited to the advantage of the strong. Such exploitation rules out de facto the virtue of gentleness.
    - Many times, this is regarded as virtuous or praiseworthy.
      - In the world of sports, a successful team is a team that plays to its strength and exploits the other team’s weaknesses.
      - In military conflict, winning is accomplished by maximizing your strengths as well as your opponent's weaknesses.
      - In the world of business, competitors want to highlight their product’s strengths and expose the competition’s weaknesses.
      - In some situations, such as sports, that’s the point of the competition. But it’s easy to begin to carry this mindset over into our personal lives, so that we either neglect or exploit those who are weak.
If we would walk as the Savior walked, we must have a different mindset. We must cultivate the virtue of gentleness. [Proposition] We are called to gentleness so that we might reflect the character of the Savior. That means that we will begin to think about those who are weak in a different way than the world does.

To flesh this out, I want to give you three things you must do if you would emulate the Savior in manifesting gentleness.

I. Understand the Meaning of Gentleness

A. To this point, we’ve talked about weakness, but we haven’t really defined gentleness. So let’s start with a definition and see what exactly Paul means by this word.

1. Throughout history, various people have defined this term differently.
   a) Aristotle defined gentleness as the mean between excessive proneness to anger and incapacity for anger.
      (1) The idea is the person who gets angry in the right way at the right things at the right time.
      (2) The problem I have with this kind of definition is that the word does not seem to be primarily about anger. It surely has something to say about a person’s temper and anger, but gentleness according Aristotle almost seems like the opposite of what we would think, almost an encouragement toward anger, even if simply the right kind of anger.
   b) One Greek lexicon defines the term as the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance. That is quite different from Aristotle as it doesn’t even mention anger. It also seems closer to the mark. It would be better, though, if it were cast in positive rather than negative terms, because it only explains what not to do, not what to do as a gentle person.

2. Here’s a definition I came up with of gentleness. [Definition] Gentleness is a courageous, compassionate humility produced by the Spirit in all believers.
   a) Some people have noted that virtues like courage and humility are missing from the fruit of the Spirit.
   b) I contend that these virtues are not missing but included in the concept of gentleness.
   c) Let’s unpack this definition.

B. Humility

1. Humility is the central focus of the definition of gentleness. The gentle person is a humble person.
   a) We see this meaning of the term in Scripture. For example, in Numbers 12:3, it says... Read Numbers 12:3.
      (1) The idea here is similar to the definition I read you earlier. Moses was not impressed with himself. He was not prideful. He was not self-absorbed.
      (2) Moses understood his lowliness. He understood his own failures and weaknesses. He understood his relationship to God as a sinner in need of grace. He was humble, and because he was a person who had a face-to-face relationship with God, he was more humble than anyone else on earth.
b) Gentleness relates to weakness, specifically how we handle the weaknesses of others. This kind of gentleness, therefore, demands we are humble.

(1) That indicates, like Moses, that we are not self-absorbed. We are not impressed with our titles, our status, our finances, our physical appearance, our social standing, or anything else.

(2) It also indicates that we understand our own weaknesses. One of the clearest paths to humility is to study your own failures and weaknesses. This applies to just about anything you might do.

(a) I remember being in St. Louis with Randi, celebrating our third anniversary. At that time we were struggling with the possibility of infertility. And it was difficult, but we had a light moment on an elevator at the hotel where we were staying. We got on the elevator and turned to see a family of five coming to get on the elevator with us. The there kids were all under ten, and they came literally screaming down the hall, jumping around, got on the elevator before their parents could catch up. And the parents were out of breath, carrying all the supplies for their day, and totally frazzled. We held the door until the parents could catch up to their three excited and wild children and when we got off the elevator, we looked at each other and said, “You know, it’s kind of nice to be here just the two of us and not be that family.” I’m sure at some point the thought crossed my mind, “Of course, with my parenting skills, we would never be that family.”

(b) But God has a way of humbling us. Nine years and four kids later, there are days we wish we could be as organized as that family!

(c) It’s an interesting thing. We can be so proud until we realize that we too are people of flesh, and we share in the weaknesses of others.

2. Another vital aspect to this humility is that it marks a submission to the Word and will of God. Read James 1:21.

a) Notice that the way we receive the Word of God is with humility, which is the same word Paul used in Gal 5:23 for gentleness.

b) The humble person understands his weaknesses, and he understand his utter dependance on the Word of God.

c) This aspect of humility is what makes it impossible for the unbeliever. The unbeliever cannot humble himself before the Word of God as an unbeliever, and therefore, the unbeliever remains the pinnacle of arrogance, rejecting the Word of God.

3. When we realize that we share in the weaknesses of others, that we ourselves are weak, and that we are dependent on God and His Word for everything, we are humbled. And that humility expresses itself in gentleness.

C. Courage

1. The second part of the definition is courage. Many people might misunderstand gentleness as weakness, or the inability to deal with weakness. For example, maybe someone does something sinful. Maybe they take the Lord’s name in vain. And you think to yourself, “Well, we all have our faults. I’ve said things I shouldn’t say, too.”
There’s a certain humility there, because you recognize your own failures, but it’s also a false humility because it lacks courage and conviction.

2. One place in the Bible where we see courage and humility combined in a powerful way is in 2 Corinthians. Turn to 2 Cor. 10:1. Paul writes, Read 2 Cor. 10:1.

   a) Paul speaks to the Corinthians from a position of humility and gentleness. He’s not standing over them as the person who has it all together. He is not speaking to them as if they are the sinners and he has reached perfection. He speaks to them as someone who knows his own weaknesses. In fact, he will go on to talk about his weaknesses in chapter 12 of this letter!

   b) But in chapters 10-11, Paul boldly and courageously confronts the Corinthians for their errors and sins. He says things that might shock us when we consider gentleness.

      (1) For example, 2 Cor. 11:5-6. He compares himself favorably with the greatest apostles!

      (2) Also, 2 Cor. 11:13-15. Here, Paul calls these false teachers servants of Satan. Doesn’t seem very gentle, at least not the way we typically conceive of gentleness.

   c) But we must remember that what Paul writes here, he writes in the spirit of Christ’s gentleness. Biblical gentleness is courageous. It wasn’t easy for Paul to write this, but he did it out of a courageous humility. He understood all his own weaknesses. He understood his position before God. He knew his failures and was up front about them. He was humble. And he was courageous. When error needed to be confronted, he confronted it with conviction and humility.

3. Paul told Timothy to follow this example of courageous humility. 2 Tim. 2:24-26. Timothy is called to be courageous by confronting those who oppose the Gospel. But he is also to remember that they are captives of the devil. They act as those who are insane in their opposition to Christ. So Paul tells Timothy to confront them and do so courageously, but also to be gentle, be humble, because they are like madmen due to the devil’s power over them. Remember their weaknesses.

4. So gentleness is a courageous humility.

D. Compassion

1. It’s also compassionate. If we stay with this example in 2 Timothy, the gentleness Paul calls Timothy to show arises from a heart of compassion.

2. One more text helps bring this out. Notice Galatians 6:1. Notice how all of these elements come into play.

   a) The restoration requires courage. If you’ve ever been in a church discipline situation, you understand this. Confronting someone who is caught in sin is a frightening and daunting task. It requires immense prayer. It is overwhelming.

   b) This restoration also requires compassion. The spirit of gentleness indicates a love for the brother or sister in sin. A heart that grieves over sin. A heart that longs for restoration.

   c) And notice the humility. Looking also to yourselves! See, you too could be tempted. You too might fall into sin and need help if you’re not careful. You share
in the same weaknesses as the person you’re confronting. Remember that, so that you stay humble and act with gentleness when you confront.

3. Compassion indicates, then, the spirit in which we treat others when we act in gentleness. We show love. We show grace. We show patience and kindness. We have pity. It’s the opposite of being harsh and savage.

   a) The opposite word in Greek meant savagery. Sometimes the savagery that comes from evil desires and lust.

   b) Sometimes the savagery was that of wild animals. Untamed animals.

   c) Gentleness, then, has the idea of compassion, not brutality or hardness or roughness.

E. So, gentleness is a courageous, compassionate humility produced by the Spirit in all believers.

II. Learn from Jesus’ Example of Gentlenessness

A. The prophets declare that the Messiah would be gentle. Read Zech 9:9. The word translated humble also means gentle.

B. Jesus Himself picked up this theme in Matthew 11:29. Read Matt. 11:29. Here we see the combination of being gentle and being humble, as these words frequently are joined together in the NT.

C. When we consider this, what does it mean that Jesus was gentle? How did this gentleness express itself?

   1. We could find numerous examples in the Gospels. We might think of the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus was so patient, so gentle with her. We might think of the numerous times he dealt with little-faith disciples with such tenderness and care. We might think of when He healed the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. Or perhaps the raising of Lazarus from the dead, or the numerous others that He had compassion on and raised. These are all wonderful examples of gentleness.

   2. But one particular thing stands out to me above them all. And that is the act that made all of them possible: the Incarnation. Consider the gentleness of the Son of God in coming into the world to save sinners.

      a) First of all, what humility He displayed! Turn to Philippians 2. Notice verse 6. Read Phil 2:6. Here we have the very essence and heart of humility. Notice two things about Jesus here.

         (1) He was equal with God. He was in the form of God. That basically means that He was God and God only. He was not human. He was eternally existing with God the Father as a member of the Triune God, the Son of God, from all eternity.

         (2) He used His power to help the weak. The phrase, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped is difficult to interpret and translate. It has the idea of seizing something. And the idea is that Jesus was equal with God, but He did not regard His equality with God as an opportunity to seize power. He did not regard His equality with God as an opportunity to seek His own advantage and benefit. Instead, notice verse 7. Read vv. 7-8. He emptied Himself. He became human. Then He humbled Himself by obeying
everything His Father commanded, to the point of dying on a cross, the worst, most humiliating death humanity had ever conceived.

(3) When we fell into sin in Adam, the Son of God could have become enraged and used every ounce of His power to destroy us. And there would have been no sin in judging us for our sins without offering salvation. He would have been just to do that. But instead, He was gentle with us. He humbled Himself. He came into the world to save sinners, not condemn them. That is the true spirit of humility and gentleness.

b) Think about the courage this took!

(1) I cannot even conceive of being crucified and going through the physical suffering Jesus endured. We know the agony He suffered because He prayed that if at all possible, God would save His people another way. There was no other way. He sweat drops of blood from the anguish of His soul.

(2) Add to this bearing the sins of His people, bearing the wrath of God in our place. This spiritual suffering went beyond the physical suffering. He was separated from the Father. He endured the wrath of God for us.

(3) The walk to Golgotha was the most courageous act in the history of the world. One of my favorite singer/songwriters, Ross King, wrote a song called, “Hallelujah For the Cross,” and it starts out like this: Up to the hill of Calvary, my Savior went courageously, and there He bled and died for me, Hallelujah for the cross."

(4) When we think about Jesus’ death, we typically think of His love, His grace, His mercy, and God’s justice, and rightly so. But we must not stop there. We must also think of His gentleness. His courage. Jesus is the mightiest warrior, the greatest champion, and yet in His gentleness He bows to the Father’s will and takes our punishment.

(5) Paul emphasizes this by the way he describes Jesus’ death in verse 8. It was a cross-type of death, the worst, most humiliating, most horrific death possible. Jesus went to the cross, not as the victim, but as the victor. Only the greatest courage can take someone to the cross, under the wrath of God, and to the grave with the certainty of resurrection and vindication and glorification.

(6) All of this ties into the incarnation, because the cross was His reason for coming. He came to die. His courage was displayed from the moment of conception, as He came down from heaven to save His people from their sins.

c) Not just humility and courage, but what compassion the Lord Jesus displayed in coming down from heaven to save us. He condescends to a sinful world, taking the form of a slave as a human being. He does it willingly. He does it faithfully. He does it compassionately because of His love for us.

D. When we consider the Lord Jesus Christ and His gentleness, it serves as a powerful reminder of what kind of gentleness the Spirit would produce in us. He would produce in us the same gentleness that existed in the Savior.

1. A gentleness that humbles itself to do God’s will, whatever that will might be.
2. A gentleness that acts courageously, because doing the will of God requires unusual courage and strength.

3. A gentleness that acts compassionately, reaching out to sinners not in condemnation, but in grace, in love, in mercy, in restoration and salvation.

III. Grow in the Practice of Gentleness

A. How can we grow in the area of gentleness? This question is a significant one for me, because I know that this part of the Spirit's fruit poses a greater struggle than some of the others.

B. Because the causes of our harshness comes from many different places, let me suggest to you that if you struggle with gentleness, it indicates a struggle with one of the three areas we have discussed this morning.

1. People who struggle with gentleness might struggle with humility.
   a) Pride will kill gentleness, as we've already seen.
   b) Humility begins with our relationship to God through His Word. Do we put ourselves under the Word of God as subject to it, or do we sit over the Word of God, as judges of it?
   c) Remember how Moses was the most gentle man on the face of the earth, indicating his profound humility. Moses knew the Word of God intimately, especially since God used him to write the first five books of the Bible. Moses’ humility was derived from his relationship to God and his subjection to the Word of God.
   d) The truly humble person lives a life devoted to the Word of God.

2. People who struggle with gentleness might struggle with courage.
   a) Gentleness is not weakness. Gentleness demands real courage. But what if you struggle with courage?
   b) There’s a really helpful book that addresses this question, and it’s called *When People Are Big and God Is Small* by Ed Welch.
   c) Obviously we can’t get into the book this morning, but think about just the title. How often do we lack courage because God seems so small in comparison to your problems? Those problems might be other people. They might be a temptation you battle. They might be a situation you face.
   d) Proverbs 29:25 says, **Read Prov. 29:25.** The problem that short circuits true gentleness is often a fear of man. It brings a snare. Man looks big. Our problems look big. And God looks small. To be gentle, we must reverse that. We must learn to trust in the Lord and not fear man.

3. People who struggle with gentleness might struggle with compassion.
   a) Why do we struggle with compassion? The one group that really seemed to struggle with compassion in the New Testament was the Pharisees. Jesus rebuked them for their cold hearts and their merciless attitudes toward others.
   b) The Pharisees rejected the Gospel. They did not like the message of the Gospel. Why not? Because the Gospel says that we all are sinners in need of grace and compassion. They didn’t like to think of themselves that way.
c) When we lack compassion, we are forgetting the reality of the Gospel. We are living or acting contrary to the Gospel itself. We are saying that we ourselves do not need grace or mercy or compassion.

d) When we lack compassion, it's time to go back to the basics. It's time to remember the immense compassion we needed. It's time to remember the immense compassion we received from God in Christ. It's time to meditate on the truths of the Gospel.

- Let us be known for our gentleness, especially when we deal with those who are weak. If you're like me, that might be a struggle. But nevertheless, gentleness is a courageous, compassionate humility produced by the Spirit in all believers. Where you struggle, repent. When you have victory, thank God.

- And when you struggle, spend time in God's Word, remember God's power, and meditate on the truths of the Gospel. God's gentleness with us is beyond measure. May His gentleness be displayed in us through the Spirit's power.