

GENTLENESS

SERIES: FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT



Catalog No. 20220821
Galatians 5:22-23
Ninth Message
Paul Taylor
August 21, 2022

Galatians 5:22-23

This morning I want us to think about our topic through a little demonstration.

[Egg toss demonstration]

If my demonstration worked, I have given you a picture of two very different attitudes. The first is gentleness: that is the way our volunteer attempted to catch the egg. The second is outrage: the emotion you felt toward me when I threw the egg high in the air for the volunteer to catch. Gentleness and outrage.

These are two approaches that I can have toward another person. They are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Gentleness tries to be careful, to avoid hurting another person, and take their fragility into account. Outrage screams, “How dare you!”, “Who do you think you are?” and works to crush the other person under accusation and shame.

One of these is more common than the other in our culture today. Which one would you say that it is?

Our culture has become what people label an “outrage culture”. Gone are the days of simply disagreeing with another person on an issue of political or social, or theological importance. Anyone who sees things differently from you is dangerous, motivated by hatred and prejudice, and cannot be trusted with anything.

Ed Stetzer published a book a few years ago called *Christians in the Age of Outrage* where he tried to help Jesus followers love others authentically in such a culture. The Harvard Business School has a section of publications which deal with “outrage culture.” In the past two days, I’ve seen the following headlines, “Homeless haven sparks outrage”¹, “Amnesty International stirs outrage”², “Florida State Attorney says ‘This should outrage everyone,’”³ and “Where is the National Outrage Over Uvalde?”⁴

Why is everyone outraged all the time over every little thing?

This morning we are not talking about outrage. Today we are continuing our series on the Fruit of the Spirit. We have been looking at nine relational attitudes in the book of Galatians that the apostle Paul describes as the result of walking by the Spirit. These things happen in your life when your daily life is lived in step with the Spirit of the Living God.

Let’s read the Galatians 5 verse one more time.

Galatians 5:22-23:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Today we are talking about gentleness.

Gentleness is something that our culture desperately needs. When was the last time you encountered someone gentle? When was the last time you saw a gentle post on social media? When was the last time you had a gentle disagreement with another person?

I think we’re afraid of gentleness. It feels weak. We do not believe we are articulating ourselves well if we are gentle. If we are gentle, we might be overlooked. Gentleness does not accomplish anything. No one gets anything done when they are gentle.

Yet Jesus invites us to come to him because he is “gentle and lowly.” Isn’t that precisely what we find ourselves craving? Aren’t we desperate for just a little gentleness?

This morning will see how it is that the Spirit of God can grow gentleness within us. We will start by talking about what gentleness is. Then we will consider why it is so difficult for us. Why does outrage come so much more

easily? Finally, we will land on that key question: how does walking by the Spirit grow gentleness within us?

What is Gentleness?

We have to start by defining about what we are talking. What is gentleness?

The biblical word for gentleness is very interesting. The underlying Greek word is *prautes*. This word appears 11 times in the New Testament. The related adjective “gentle” appears another four times. Around half the time, this word appears in a pair or list of words. You will find combinations like “meekness and gentleness” (2 Corinthians 10:1), “humility and gentleness” (Ephesians 4:2), or “gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:16).

The definition of the Greek word is “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance. Gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness, meekness.”⁵

Notice that the definition doesn’t begin with how I treat you. It starts with how I think about myself: “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance.” I can be gentle with you when I don’t take myself too seriously.

Think back to the example of trying to catch an egg. That is not a very good illustration of the kind of gentleness we are trying to cultivate. With the egg, I am gentle because I am worried that I will break the egg. But with biblical gentleness, I am gentle with you because I am confident I will not be broken. I am gentle with the egg because it is fragile. I can be gentle with you because I am confident that I am not fragile.

We need to understand my ability to be gentle has more to do with me than with you.

Proverbs 15:1:

A soft answer turns away wrath.

Let us consider this kind of situation. You are angry with me, and approach me with wrath, maybe even outrage. What is going to allow me to be gentle with you?

It is not me worrying that you are fragile. Gentleness is not the white glove treatment: me being careful because my words might break you. It is me being calm because I am stable enough for your words not to hurt me.

I am gentle with you because I can handle whatever you bring to me. I do not have to react or get defensive, or hit back. In Ephesians, the apostle Paul calls this “bearing with one another.” Listen to this exhortation and notice how many words are repeated from the idea of the fruit of the Spirit.

Ephesians 4:1b-2:

Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.

Do you see? Gentleness has to do with bearing with one another.

The longer I live, the more I realize that my responses to people have more to do with me than with you. If you pay attention to how you react to people, you start noticing a pattern. Why does it seem that people always seem to affect me in the same way?

Eventually, many of us realize that the common denominator is ourselves. We find it hard to bear with one another, not simply because other people are hard to bear with, but because we are wounded, broken, rebellious, or stubborn. Why do I feel on the fringe of social groups all the time? Is it because everyone in the world conspires against me? Or is there something within myself that makes me prone to feel that way?

The famous psychologist Carl Jung said, “Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.”

If it looks like everyone is always wearing blue shirts, then two things are possible. The entire world has agreed on a single uniform without my realizing it. Or I am walking around with blue-tinted glasses. Which one seems more likely?

That simple observation helps us tremendously with our second question. Why is being gentle so difficult? Why does outrage come so much more naturally?

What makes gentleness difficult?

The answer is simple. If gentleness is knowing that I cannot be broken by you, I don’t always know that. In fact, a lot of the time, I feel incredibly fragile. I am easily broken by the circumstances which assault me every day. I find it hard to be gentle, not because you are not fragile, but because I am.

This is the heart of the Christian message. The problem with the world is not out there but in here. What is wrong with the world is me.

Let's think about the times when we are tempted not to be gentle with the person in front of us. Under what situations do I find it particularly difficult to be gentle?

- When I think something needs to happen a certain way.
- When I feel threatened. I need to prevent something bad from happening to me.
- It is hard for me to be gentle when I have been hurt.
- When I am absolutely convinced that I am right on a certain topic and the other person is wrong, it is easy for me not to be gentle.

Maybe a story will help us put all these things together.

You are probably familiar with King David in the Bible. He was the one who killed Goliath before he became king. David faced a unique season of life after he had been anointed king by his mentor, the prophet Samuel. God recognized him as king, but the rest of the world did not. The man sitting on the throne, Saul, recognized him as a threat and was trying to kill him.

David was in a vulnerable situation. Then this happened.

1 Samuel 25:1-3:

Now Samuel died. And all Israel assembled and mourned for him, and they buried him in his house at Ramah. Then David rose and went down to the wilderness of Paran. 2 And there was a man in Maon whose business was in Carmel. The man was very rich; he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. He was shearing his sheep in Carmel. 3 Now the name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. The woman was discerning and beautiful, but the man was harsh and badly behaved; he was a Calebite.

David was running around in the wilderness and had actually helped take care of this man's sheep. In the ancient world, a sheep shearing was a huge communal party. So David asked whether he and his men could

join the party. It was a normal kind of request in that culture. But Nabal refused. But not only that, but he also insulted David. Apparently, he was aware of the conflict between Saul and David. In his insult, he accused David of being disloyal to Saul.

The result was that David found it very hard to be gentle with Nabal.

1 Samuel 25:13:

And David said to his men, "Every man strap on his sword!" And every man of them strapped on his sword. David also strapped on his sword. And about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred remained with the baggage.

This is a war party, more like a massacre party. David was going to take 400 armed soldiers and completely destroy this businessman and his entire family. A lot of blood was about to be shed.

The story of David here can help us recognize what makes gentleness difficult. This is the idea we have been moving toward. The answer is within us. If you want to know why you have a hard time being gentle, look inward.

Let's do that for David. Let's look inside his heart as best we can. What made gentleness difficult for him at that moment? Samuel just died—he had lost his mentor. David was in a vulnerable position. An old friend was trying to kill him. He had been living in the wilderness and was hungry and tired. David was living apart from his family. He had been hopeful and optimistic for a brief respite during the sheep shearing, but that idea had crumbled. Instead of rest, he was reviled. Instead of an invitation, he received an insult.

David was lonely, hungry, tired, grieving, vulnerable, insulted, misunderstood, disappointed, and judged. It is hard to be gentle with all of that going on. David was focused on himself. By focusing on himself, the offense of Nabal quickly turned into outrage, and outrage quickly escalated into violence.

An acronym is often used in recovery to explain the times you are most likely to relapse. The same conditions are true when we are likely not to be gentle. H-A-L-T. Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. It is much harder to be gentle when I find myself in one of those states.

I have a hard time being gentle when all I can see is myself—my needs, my hurts, my offense, my sense of right and wrong. That fits exactly with our definition from before. It is hard to be gentle when I am overly impressed by my sense of self-importance.

That is when God steps in.

God grows gentleness within us

We have seen a definition of gentleness, and we have talked about the difficulty of being gentle. Finally, we will get some directions about cultivating gentleness within us. Every week we have been asking the question, “How does walking by Spirit cultivate this particular fruit of the Spirit?” I suggest there are two primary ways.

First, walking by the Spirit turns our attention toward God. Our eyes are drawn away from ourselves and pointed toward God. Second, we are reminded of some core truths about God which address our own brokenness.

We have already observed that I am tempted to be “ungentle” when focused on myself. That may help to explain why Paul describes his list of antisocial behaviors as “deeds of the flesh.” They emerge from within myself when all I can see are my own hurts, needs, and demands. Deeds of the flesh are driven by self-orientation.

When we orient ourselves toward God or walk by the Spirit, we are freed from the prison of our brokenness. It is not that my needs and hurts are somehow unimportant or illegitimate. I don’t disappear when I walk by the Spirit, but the whole character of my life is understood and experienced in a new context. Instead of only seeing what’s true about me, I see what is true about God. I am reminded of some core truths of God’s character.

What is true of our God?

Reflecting on the verse which describes God as “slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness,” author Dane Ortlund says this,

*“His anger requires provocation; his mercy is pent up, ready to gush forth. We tend to think: divine anger is pent up, spring-loaded; divine mercy is slow to build. It’s just the opposite. Divine mercy is ready to burst forth at the slightest prick.”*⁶

You may have already realized that we tend to work in exactly the opposite way. Most of us are quick to anger but require a lot to be gentle.

That was certainly true of David when he prepared to attack the fool, Nabal. But then Nabal’s wife Abigail stepped in. She spoke to David and reminded him of some core truths of God. In 6 verses, Abigail references the Lord four times. Until this point, the Lord had not been mentioned in the entire chapter. Abigail takes the attention away from David and the offense he has suffered and points it toward the Lord.

In doing so, she also reminds David of certain critical truths about God. Listen to these phrases that she says.

“when the LORD has done ... all the good that he has spoken”: Abigail reminds David that he does not need to make good things happen because God will keep his promises. God will bring about the good. It is not up to David to force it. In the face of fear, God brings confidence.

“the life of my lord shall be bound ... in the care of the LORD”: Abigail points out that David does not need to be threatened by anything. The Lord will care for him. Nothing can touch him. In the face of threat, God brings safety.

“the LORD will certainly make my lord a sure house”: Even if David has been hurt or insulted, or misunderstood, God will bring healing. At this point, David’s house is far from sure—it lies in shambles. But God will restore. In the face of hurt, God will heal.

“no cause for grief ... for my lord working salvation for himself”: Abigail points out that even if David is correct, it is not up to him to prove it. In fact, working salvation for himself will make him wrong. Abigail doesn’t defend Nabal’s actions. David is clearly in the right in this situation. But she reminds him that it is not his place to judge. In the face of injustice, God brings righteousness.

Abigail helps David to see God. In essence, she comes alongside him and helps him to walk by the Spirit. David’s response is gentleness.

1 Samuel 25:32:

“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me!”

David’s attention was taken off himself and turned toward God, which led to gentleness. This is how it works for us as well. When we are tempted not to be gentle, we can remember the Lord.

Several weeks ago, when we introduced this series, we talked about the dynamics of walking. I described walking as controlled falling. Each step almost results in me crashing onto the floor. So when we walk by the Spirit, God constantly keeps us from falling.

That is what happens here. Our eyes are drawn toward ourselves. We see our hurt, we feel wronged, and we are sure we are right. Outrage is about to burst forth from our hearts. Then we remember the Lord. We remember that he protects us. The Lord brings justice, holds our future, and heals our hurts. Instead of falling, we take that next step by the Spirit.

Notice that sometimes remembering the Lord is very practical. Abigail didn't just give a speech. She also brought David and his friends some food. Remember the acronym HALT? She knew that David would find it easier to remember the Lord if he wasn't quite so hungry. So she fed him.

That is a good reminder that our relationship with God is not just a spiritual thing. Our bodies are part of it. Our emotions. Hunger, pain, tiredness. All of those come into play. This is why we regularly pray for God to provide our daily bread. It is all connected.

Walking by the Spirit and growing the fruit of the Spirit is not a one-time action. It is a daily, moment-by-moment dependence on the presence of God within us. Because God is with us, we "are not overly impressed by a sense of our self-importance," and we can be gentle.

Conclusion

We started this morning by thinking about gentleness and outrage. You watched a surprised volunteer try to catch an egg as gently as possible. You felt a bit of outrage at me because of how difficult I made it. These are the emotions and attitudes towards each other which vacillate in our hearts. We want to be gentle, but all too often, we find ourselves outraged or upset.

We have seen that the problem is not with the world around us but deep within ourselves. Only the God who says he is gentle and lowly himself can meet our needs and grow gentleness within us.

Ultimately, God is able to be gentle because he is not broken like we are. Nothing can hurt him. Nothing threatens his power. Nothing challenges his identity. He is perfectly secure in who he is. God can be gentle because he is invincible.

We are not invincible, but we have the Spirit of God within us. Because of that, we can rest securely in God's power and be gentle with the people around us.

Endnotes

1. Ariel Zilber, "Homeless haven planned for island near ultra-rich Miami enclave sparks outrage" *New York Post*, (August 8, 2022). <https://nypost.com/2022/08/08/miamis-plan-to-house-homeless-on-beach-island-sparks-outrage/>.
 2. "Amnesty International stirs outrage" *The New York Times*, (date) <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/07/world/europe/amnesty-international-ukraine-russia-war-crimes.html>
 3. "'This should outrage everyone'" MSNBC, (August 6, 2022) <https://www.msnbc.com/americans-voices/watch/-this-should-outrage-everyone-florida-state-attorney-suspended-by-gov-desantis-145645125952>.
 4. David A. Graham, "Where Is the National Outrage Over Uvalde?" *The Atlantic*, (July 12, 2022) <https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2022/07/where-is-the-national-outrage-over-uvalde/670501/>.
 5. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), BibleWorks.
- Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 148.