

Fruit of the Spirit

Week 8: Gentleness

Matthew 11:28-30

Robert Morris ---- July 30, 2023

Good morning, Grace! I'm so glad you're here today.

Let me tell you about a really great day at our house that happened a couple of years ago. It was one of those days that was thirty-something years in the making. We're talking real rites of passage type stuff between a father and his son. It was one of those days—Norman Rockwell type of day. It was the day that all of my old baseball cards came down from the attic.

Nathan was interested. He wanted to see what players we had, wanted to see if we had anything valuable from my collection from the eighties and early nineties. But before we did that, we had to have this kind of conversation: we had to say, “Hey, that Ken Griffey, Jr. card ... I know you want to touch it. We're going to leave it in its little protective sleeve, okay? Hey, that Sammy Sosa rookie card—the one where you don't recognize him because he's all pre-steroidal and normal looking? Let's leave that one alone. Hey, but if you see one with Billy Ripken on it, have at it. I mean, you can throw it to the dog in the next yard, you can sleep with it—I don't care. But if you see Billy's brother Cal, okay, hold tight. Don't touch that one.”

And for the most part he gets it. He's even into this now with his own generation of cards. He's trying to take care of them and trying to figure out which ones are going to be valuable later on. We've only had to have a couple of conversations where I said something like this: “Hey, buddy, do you know what you have in your hands? If you really did, I think you might treat it differently. You might handle it differently.”

Now, you might have a similar story in your own family of some precious family heirloom, something that was handed down from generation to generation—that old quilt, that piece of jewelry, that piece of fine china, or maybe that old car in Granddad's garage.

“Son, if you only knew what you had in your hands, it might change your approach. It might change the way you handle it. See, son, there are some things that because of their value, we have to take care of them a certain way.”

And as I'm saying these things, of course the Lord is impressing on my heart a spiritual truth. How we treat things says a lot about how we value them. And it's in that light that we're moving on in our series on the fruit of the Spirit. We've done love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. And now we're on to gentleness.

And gentleness might be the most overlooked of the spiritual fruits in this list. It's potentially the one that is the most misunderstood, and it could be the one that you and I desire the least.

And the reason I know that is because a couple of years ago—a number of years ago—George Barna did a research project of Christians. And he gave out thirty different biblical characteristics and asked Christians to rank them in level of importance from one to thirty. And I think you know where this is going—guess what was number thirty? Gentleness.

Gentleness—it's the one for me that when I was talking to my wife and saying, "Yeah, I've got to fill in for Matt and we're doing some of these fruits of the Spirit messages." And she asked me which ones I had, and I got to gentleness and she literally laughed out loud. I felt very attacked.

So, you have to know today that I'm not coming to you as a man who is an expert in this, but more like someone who's a failure many times over. You see someone who's well acquainted with how a lack of gentleness can damage valuable things and how much I need the Spirit's help. You see, I'm a man who doesn't always treat the valuable things in life the way I should.

A virtue, to which I need in a higher degree, to give a beauty and luster to my behavior, is gentleness. If I had more of an air of gentleness, I should be much mended.

---Jonathan Edwards

I resonate very much with Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan, when he wrote a couple of hundred years ago, speaking of gentleness. He said this: "A virtue, to which I need in a higher degree, to give a beauty and luster to my behavior, is gentleness. If I had more of an air of gentleness, I should be much mended." Me too, Jonathan, me too.

And so, as we begin today, I want to remind you of the context of the fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5 is the context with this list of godly characteristics. But we need to remember that I bring deeds of the flesh to the party. That's what I bring. But I'm told through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit that was given to me as promise and a seal and a guarantee when I became a disciple and a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ; I'm told that if I walk by His Spirit, I will not gratify the deeds of the flesh. But instead, He will grow fruit in me ... much fruit and more fruit. And one beautiful aspect of that fruit is gentleness.

And so, let's dig into it this morning. Here's what I'm hoping to accomplish with this. I want us to look at this word. I want you to look at this concept. We'll do a brief tour of the Scriptures on this topic, and while we do that we're going to see the need for it, who we're supposed to give it to, who it's required of. But ultimately, we're going to see that this is a characteristic of God himself, and it's perfectly exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ. And then I want us to ask the question—the natural question—which is, *Do I need more of this fruit and how do I get it?*

Gentleness Defined

So, let's define it. As I mentioned before, it's easy to misunderstand this concept, because most of the time when we think of gentleness, we think of weakness or passivity, or not enough backbone, not being strong enough. It seems incredibly unappealing. It lacks power or ambition or success. Those gentle people aren't strong enough to get the job done. They get taken advantage of, they never get the good parking spot in the parking lot because they're just not aggressive enough. And I'm here to win.

But as we look at this concept, I want you to see that the origins of the word Paul uses in Galatians 5 is sometimes in your Bibles translated as “meekness.” And it's unfortunate that “meekness” and “weakness” rhyme, because that is not the concept at all. Instead, one of the more common usages of the root word that we have with gentleness in that day and age in Galatians 5 is when it's used of an animal that's been tamed and brought under control. So, as you think about gentleness, maybe the image that should pop in your head is more like a racehorse that has been disciplined to do exactly what its rider has been instructing it to do; a powerful stallion that its reins have been handed off to an owner so that now that owner can use that raw power and strength for his good purposes.

As I was thinking about this concept and how to illustrate it, I naturally thought of my daughter. She has taught me a lot about gentleness and my lack thereof. Now one of the things we love to do at our house, and still to this day, is to wrestle and mix it up. I mean, we go hard in the Morris house. We've broken a few things here and there. But she likes to mix it up just like her brother. But when we do, I do not go at full strength, right? It's different. Now don't tell her that. Don't ruin the fun for her. She's tough. I want her to be tough. But it's not the same. I know how much power I have. It's a mismatch. And so, I have to temper that because she's precious to me. And I don't want her to unnecessarily hurt. And I don't want to hear her scream, because it's loud. In fact, most of the times that I myself have gotten hurt in these wrestling matches has been when I have tried to contort my body in some way so that she wouldn't feel the full brunt of my strength. It has to be under control. I have to hold my strength back.

And so, a more biblical definition of gentleness might be something like “power and strength that are under control.” And that person, ideally, is under the control of the Holy Spirit. He's using that strength and power for His good purposes on this earth.

And so, in the Bible, gentleness is not a lack of strength. Guys, ladies, we can still throw the iron around in the workroom. Be strong. But it's godly, Spirit-fueled exercise of this power.

And we know this because later on we're going to see that gentleness is a word that is used to describe God himself. And there is no lack of power—there's only the appropriate use of that power.

Gentleness in the Scriptures

So, let's do a brief rundown. I'll give you a quick synopsis of this idea of gentleness that we find in the Scriptures. If you're a note taker, you can write these down, maybe read them later, maybe dig into them yourself. This is how we see gentleness portrayed to us in the Scriptures.

[Titus 3:2](#)—we're told to be gentle and to show perfect courtesy towards all people. It's the same word that's used in Galatians 5.

[Ephesians 4:1-2](#)—Paul, in his transitional statement between really high theology about who Jesus Christ is and what He came to do, and as he moves to application, tells the Ephesian believers to walk in a manner worthy of their calling ... with ... and then he's going to fill in the blank. And you would expect that he might say “with all boldness,” “with all zeal,” “with all

fortitude,” “with sacrifice, faith, love.” No, he says to walk in a manner worthy of your calling with all humility and gentleness. That’s the manner worthy to walk—be completely gentle.

[1 Thessalonians 2:7](#)—Paul describes the way he interacts with the people of Thessalonica, and he says, “[We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother caring for her own children.](#)” There are a lot of metaphors used in the Scriptures about Christian life and ministry: soldier, farmer, athlete, shepherd. But it also includes the example of a nursing mother. There’s a level of care and attention and concern.

[Galatians 6:1](#) and [2 Timothy 2:24-25](#) tell us that if we are going to need to correct someone or restore someone, that it should be done with gentleness. And this is important, because gentleness, therefore, can’t mean that I agree with everyone all the time, or that you can do whatever you want and it’s okay, or I have no conviction. It implies that there will be this need for correction, this need for restoration. But when it’s done, it’s supposed to be done in a certain way, not harshly or vindictively. It should be done gently with power under control.

[Colossians 3:19](#) and [1 Peter 3:1-7](#) give instructions to husbands and wives about how they’re supposed to interact with one another. Husbands are told, “[Do not be harsh with your wives and live with them in an understanding way](#)” or “[a gentle way.](#)” Women are instructed that their gentle spirit will be the first thing that people notice about them. That is the most attractive thing about them. The thing that you notice first is their gentleness.

[1 Peter 3:15](#)—he tells us, *Look, there are times when you’re going to need to defend your faith or give an answer for the hope that is within you.* But he says to do it with gentleness and respect.

[Proverbs 15:1](#): “[A gentle or soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.](#)” I know that one to be true. Have you ever lit something up with one careless word or sentence? Yeah.

[Philippians 4:5](#) says, “[Let your reasonableness be known to all.](#)” And that word “reasonableness” is the same Greek word in [Galatians 5](#). Is that the thing you’re known for?

[1 Timothy 6:11](#)—Paul tells Timothy to chase after some things that are so important that you run after them. And he includes things like godliness and righteousness and faith and love. But on that list of things you should run after hard is gentleness.

In addition, almost every list in the New Testament about what it takes to qualify for Christian leadership or church leadership includes this idea of gentleness or a lack of harshness with people.

We also see God described that way.

In [1 Kings 19:12](#) we see Elijah in one of the worst moments of his life. And it says the Lord spoke to him in a “gentle whisper.”

In [Psalm 18:35](#) David talks about how God’s gentleness is the reason for his success.

[Isaiah 40:11](#)--God is described this way: “He tends His flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carried them close to His heart; He gently leads those that have young.” He’s gentle with us.

And so, the Bible is pretty clear. Gentleness is not an option for believers and disciples of Jesus Christ. Whatever power or strength we have, it’s supposed to be used under a certain kind of control. And ideally, those reins are handed over to the Holy Spirit. That’s what disciples do. And we also see that this is a characteristic of God himself.

And on top of that, we see our Savior, our model, Jesus. His life is a life marked with gentleness. If you read through the Gospels, it is a master class in how strength and power are used under control.

I could point you to any number of examples throughout the Gospel stories of Him using His strength and power in the right way.

But I want to take you to one very important verse in the Bible. It’s the one I want you to walk away today with, understanding, seeing, and hopefully applying to your life. For many years I missed the real “aha” moment of this passage.

Matthew 11:28-30

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

It’s in Matthew chapter 11. We’re going to start in verse 28 if you want to look there in your Bibles yourself. But it’s going to be our central verse for today.

Charles Spurgeon, when he wrote about this verse, said this is the only place that Jesus opens up and says this about himself: “This is what my heart is ...” This biblical concept of “heart” is not just an emotive thing; it’s more like this kind of control center of life. It’s kind of the “why” behind everything. In business lingo, it would be the core vision and values of Jesus Christ.

As Dane Ortlund in his more recent book *Gentle and Lowly* rightly points out, it’s the only place that Jesus self-describes what His heart is towards humanity. He says a lot about His purposes. He says a lot about His titles. He says a lot about what He came to do. He teaches a ton of spiritual truths. But this is His heart.

Matthew 11:28-30—Jesus says, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Jesus describes himself and says, “I am gentle and lowly of heart.” This is the officially licensed autobiography. And I don’t want us to miss it. Verse 29: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.” “Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Our Savior, the one we follow, the one we’re attempting to become like in all of our lives, says “Learn from me.” You’re going to need to learn this lesson. He says, *I see people in need all around me carrying heavy burdens and in need of souls’ rest.* And He says, *I am gentle and they find rest in me.*

And friends, as I thought about this this week, gentleness is something our world could use a lot more of—our communities and workplaces and churches and families would thrive if there were more of this fruit on the vine. Instead, this world is attempting to press us into its image, into its mold. And it has very little value for gentleness. It’s not trumpeted as a high value. Our role models rarely look gentle. We live in an age of outrage and anger. Success in a disagreement is not just having the best argument, but making sure you embarrass your opponent properly.

This is how my mind works ... if aliens landed on the planet, I don’t know how long it would take them down the list to get the word “gentle.” Instead, they might say this place is angry, forceful, harsh, demanding, domineering, severe, defensive, critical, passive aggressive, on and on and on. It would take a long time, I think, before they got to gentle.

And it's into this same world that Jesus comes into—the same world we live in, where we're just slightly different flavors of brokenness, where might makes right, and where power and abuse are still part of our day and age and prevalent, where you can't watch a news program without seeing multiple examples of strength being abused. And Jesus came into this saying, "I am gentle and lowly of heart. Learn from me. If you're one of mine, learn from me." Be that kind of person where people find light yokes and lighter burdens. They don't always have to be defending themselves and on guard.

Jesus might say it this way: *Look, you're one of my disciples, right? Our hearts need to be aligned. Our hearts need to be aligned on this.*

Gentleness is essential to Christian living. It's not an add-on. It is ... one of the few indisputable evidences of the Holy Spirit alive and well within someone. Gentleness is not just for some Christians, those wired in a certain way ... It is not the gift of the Spirit for the few. It is the fruit of the Spirit for all. To be gentle is to become who we were meant to be ...

---Dane Ortlund

Dane Ortlund wrote it this way: "Gentleness is essential to Christian living. It's not an add-on. It is ... one of the few indisputable evidences of the Holy Spirit alive and well within someone. Gentleness is not just for some Christians, those wired in a certain way ... It is not the gift of the Spirit for the few. It is the fruit of the Spirit for all. To be gentle is to become who we were meant to be ..."

So, friends, I am with you. Disciples of Jesus, we do not get a pass on this one. We don't get to say, *Well, it's not my personality type. I'm not wired that way. My personality is loud and abrasive.* No one gets out of the fruit of the Spirit. If the Spirit is in you and you are walking by it, then gentleness is growing. And people might need to use that word to describe you from time to time. And I'm with you—this is one is hard. I told you where I was at on this one this morning. We don't get the excuse of, *Well, that's the family I grew up in,* or *We're just hotheads by nature. I've got a short fuse. You don't know the experiences I've had in this life.* Whatever you were born with or your experience is just the beginning point of what the Lord wants to do

in your life. When He turns hotheads into gentle souls, He gets so much glory. And we might get to say something like, *If you only knew the anger and rage that I lived with. But the Spirit has done something to me.*

Jesus says, *Learn from me, no matter where you start. Learn from me.* Regardless of any real or perceived disadvantage you think you might have in this area, Jesus says, *Become like me. Learn from me. I am gentle and lowly of heart. Our hearts should be aligned on this one.*

And so, I hope you're saying at this point in the message, *Okay, Robert, I've got it. Important concepts, all over the Bible, it's one of those overarching characteristics of God. It's perfectly exemplified in Jesus Christ; it's His heart. The world's hungry for it. And the Bible has given me some instruction to live and act that way.*

All right, got it. How in the world do I do that? How in the world am I going to do that? Because I might look at my life and say, Yeah, that fruit's missing. Or, There has not been a good harvest of gentleness for the last few months or the last few decades. There are way more deeds of the flesh, way more fits of rage and anger than there is gentleness in my garden.

How to Become Gentler

I'll run us through a similar application strategy as we had last week. It's the only one I know, okay?

The first thing you could do is try to know where you're at. You could get some awareness. You could do a fruit inspection. Where are you?

Now I want to warn you that with gentleness, I've just found in my own life that I am the worst judge of whether I was gentle or not. If you're like me, you are probably not the best person to assess yourself. You're going to need a second opinion here. We all think we're gentler than we really are. We all think our tone is perfect at all times. It's never condescending or biting or sharp or has an edge.

I learned something really new this week. I don't know if you knew this, but there's a mechanism in your brain. It's called the superior temporal sulcus. (I know, fancy term, right?) And when others are talking to you and when you're listening, it's the thing that's picking up on all the other cues, all the tone, body language. And it's interpreting those things for you. Guess what happens to this little part of your brain when you talk? It literally turns off. It's the reason

why you don't hear your voice the same way other people hear it. It's the reason that when you listen back to an audio recording of yourself, you think, *Is that really what I sound like?* We're always surprised when someone says we have a tone or they give us some feedback about how we come across to others. It's why your pre-teen can't make sense of why you're always on them about their tone with their mother. (Is that just at my house?)

We're terrible judges of our own gentleness. I do this all the time. I want to invite you into a scenario at my house. It's one of those rougher parenting moments. I had to spend some time in one of our children's rooms. There was some correction potentially needed. And I walked out of that room thinking, *Man, I just nailed that. I mean, I don't know if I could be close to Jesus, but ... grace and truth ... I pretty much had it.* And my wife looked at me like, *Dude, you were a sledgehammer in there. What are you talking about? Why don't you take a breath and go try it gentler?* Is this just me? I hope not. I hope it's not just me.

You need a second opinion. Andy Stanley, a pastor, used to challenge his people with this question: What's it like to be on the other side of me? Maybe during your fruit inspection this week or in the next few weeks, you might be able to find some people who you trust and say, "Hey, what's it really like to be on the other side of me?" I hope they would say something like this: "Yeah, I see you growing in gentleness. There's definitely more of that fruit on the vine. You've come a long way in the past five to ten years that I've known you." Or they might say, "Yeah, you're still as rough and harsh and grouchy and demanding and inconsiderate and a bully like you've always been."

Where does the Lord need to "de-harsh" you? Are you aware of that? What area of life could use the Spirit's work to make you a gentler person? I might say that the first place to check is probably the place where you have the most relational havoc. I have just found in my own life that most of the relational havoc in my life is downstream from a lack of gentleness. So, where's that place the Holy Spirit might be saying to you, *You may not understand the real value of the person that you're interacting with? If you did, you might not treat them that way. You might be a little more careful, maybe a little gentler.*

So, do a fruit inspection. Where are you? Walk through the orchard of your life. How are the gentleness trees doing? Sad and shriveled up? Or blooming with great gentleness? And on this one, you're going to need a second opinion. You're going to need some people you trust who can tell you, *This is what it's really like on the other side of you.*

The second application for us this morning is —and I'm going to sound like a broken record here, but really, it's the only application we have from Galatians 5—walk by the Spirit. The promise of Galatians 5 is that if I walk by the Spirit, I will not gratify the deeds of the flesh. Instead, He will grow in me a delicious, ripe fruit of gentleness in my life. And for many of us, He's got a lot of work to do. And we're going to need a lot of supernatural health.

And often when I think, *What does it mean to walk by the Spirit? Do I have a cooperation here?*—I think walking by the Spirit might look like this. It might look like you using the tools that the Lord and His Spirit have already given you. And so, three words that I want you to consider today that might provide a good pattern for how I might be able to walk by the Spirit: **pray, memorize, believe.**

I'll go through those really quickly. The first thing you could do is pray. As you wake up each morning and you try to abide and you try to attach yourself to the true vine and you walk by the Spirit, you might need to pray for the daily bread to be gentle. And some of you—I know you—you need to pray for the hourly bread to be gentle. You might need to pray this: “God, help me to see the people who surround me as You see them, as burdened, heavy laden, needing soul's rest. Help me to see them as valuable and precious and fragile, so that I might be able to use strength that is under control.” And this one's hard. You're going to need to pray for this, because there are a lot of people who are harder to love—people who are rough around the edges, people who are harsh to you in return, the folks who never seem to want to change.

You're going to need to pray for the miracle to see them with the same eyes that Jesus Christ sees them. You're going to need to pray for eyes to see this.

Next, as you walk by the Spirit, you might be able to add to your prayer, this prayer for gentleness, and pray to see the way God sees people. You could maybe memorize some Scripture. Use the tool that the Lord has already given you. Maybe make it the soundtrack of your week this week. It's the thing you keep that thing at the front of your mind.

Here's a couple of verses, if you want to jot these down, that might be good memorization verses for you.

[1 Thessalonians 2:7](#)—I referenced it earlier. “[We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother caring for her children.](#)”

Maybe for you it's [Proverbs 15:1](#). Your natural default is harshness and sharpness, and you need on the front of your mind that "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs things up."

Maybe you could memorize [Ephesians 4:1-3](#). "Walk in a manner worthy of your high calling with all humility and gentleness..."

Maybe for you it's [Matthew 11:29](#). I'd recommend it. It's the reason we put it on the sticker this morning that you'll get out at the fruit stand. You might need to remind yourself that I am told by my Savior to "learn from me." He says, "Learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and people find their souls' rest in me."

Now I'm a believer in the power of God's Word in my life. I've seen it too much. I've seen how those times when God's Word about a topic is on the forefront of my mind that it's much easier to walk by the Spirit. But if my life is devoid of God's Word running through mind, it is harder and harder to walk by the Spirit. I believe that God's Word will not return void in your life if you put it to memory and store it up in your heart.

So pray, memorize, and I think you could believe.

There's another miracle the Lord might need to do in your life, for some of you. Some of you need to believe, maybe for the very first time, that God really has been gentle with you, I mean deep in your soul; to help you believe that He's dealt with you gently. Because, depending on how you grew up or who you grew up with, what experiences you've had in your life, or maybe the spiritual community you grew up in, you may have a tendency—it may be easier for you to see God as harsh and severe and demanding. And Jesus Christ would say to you today, "No, no, don't misunderstand me. Do not misunderstand me. I am gentle and lowly of heart." God might say, "No, I am long-suffering. I am slow to anger. I am abounding in steadfast love." The Holy Spirit may need to do a miracle in your heart, that you could see God and Jesus Christ as gentle to you. Because what you believe about God is the most important thing about you. And if you believe He's dealt with you harshly, you're probably going to turn around and deal with people harshly. But if you could believe through the power of the Holy Spirit that God has been gentle with you, then you may have the beginnings of a recipe for being gentler to others.

So, walk by the Spirit, Grace Covenant Church. Pray, memorize, believe. Would you do that?

I want to finish where we started today. How we treat things says a lot about how we value them. And friends, the God of the universe values you so much that He treats you gently. He is slow to anger. Our Savior is gentle and lowly of heart. And when you come to Him, your soul finds rest and light yokes. He knows how fragile you really are, so He handles you with the care the gentleness that is befitting of the image of God inside you.

And in the same way, those who walk by His Spirit will treat the precious things of God with the care and gentleness that is appropriate, with strength that is under control, so that the people I interact with this week—the grocery store clerk that is going way too slow, or that coworker who did that thing again, or that spouse who used those two words and they know it drives you crazy, or that aging parent who's losing some of their control and abilities and they're coming to grips with their own mortality and they're lashing out at you with anger and stubbornness and frustration—you might be able to see those people, whether they would every say it or admit it, that they're fragile and they're image bearers of the God of the universe. They are not just some baseball cards worth a couple of hundred bucks. And they have so much more values.

And friends, you have a lot of power in their lives. So, use it wisely. Better yet, use it gently. Handle with the appropriate amount of care. Let the Holy Spirit have the reigns. Let's be a people who treat people according to their true value. And that's gently, because of the Savior who has treated us gently. And He says to His disciples, He says to us, Grace Covenant Church, this morning, "Learn from me. And follow me."

Let me pray for us.

Oh, Father God, would You make us gentle? Lord, would You make me a gentle man? Would You make us as a people at Grace Covenant Church a gentle people? Lord, right now we invite You, we invite Your Spirit, to do the work in our lives. We ask You to do in us what You've been doing for disciples for all ages. By the power of Your Spirit, would You do a supernatural work to make us a gentler people?

God, make me gentle like my Savior. Make me careful to consider and use the appropriate level of care and concern that the image-bearers all around me deserve. Jesus, how gentle You've been with me. You've been so long-suffering, so patient. Would You take the reins of this wild horse and tame it for Your glory and Your purposes on this earth? Make us a gentle

people, a people who have strength under control. And we ask it in the name of our gentle Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.