

“Gentleness in an Age of Anger”
Sermon Series on The Fruit of the Spirit #8
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(Eph. 4:1-6)

Introduction.

Is it just me, or does it feel like our country is becoming increasingly angry to you, too? It feels like the temperature of our collective anger as a nation is steadily rising. Did you happen to see the story in the news a couple of weeks ago about two incidents of road rage? The drivers got so angry that they actually fired weapons at the cars of the people with whom they were upset, and in one instance the gunfire killed a little boy who was sitting in the backseat. He was just six years old.

A number of cultural commentators have written about this trend of anger and outrage in our country over the last few years. For example, one author writes about how being offended has become a new national sport. An essayist and cartoonist for the *New York Times* says that “outrage has become a new form of an addicting drug,” and he says that we scroll through the headlines of the news looking for a reason to be offended.

Another example is a reporter I read who says that as journalists they know that the articles and headlines that provoke anger or outrage produce the most page views and clicks, and as a result they’re the ones that get the most advertising revenue. Newspapers know they are going to benefit financially from us being angry.

When you add to that all we have faced together this past year with the challenge of the pandemic along with all the racial and political unrest in our nation, and then layer onto it our ability to unleash our outrage through social media, no wonder our national anger seems to be rising.¹

What can we as Christians do about all this, and how does God want us to live counter-to-the-culture of anger? I believe the spiritual fruit of gentleness is key.

I. The Spiritual Fruit of Gentleness.

Gentleness is more than a soft disposition or a sweet personality, and it goes beyond just being tender, quiet, or mild in one’s manner. Gentleness as the Bible talks about it is an attitude of the heart empowered by the Holy Spirit which results in how we act and react to people and situations in everyday life. It is very close to humility, and sometimes they come together. For example, they are the first character qualities Paul mentions in the passage we’re read this morning. *“As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to ...be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:1-2).*

Now in the ancient world of Greece and Rome in which the apostle Paul lived, gentleness and humility weren’t highly valued at all. In fact, they were looked down upon. Humility was actually viewed as a vice, and the ideal human being was supposed to be proud, strong, and

powerful. Boasting about your superiority wasn't regarded as bad form. In fact, it was a carefully cultivated art form. Everyone wanted to be a winner, and if you were a winner, you wanted everyone else to know it.

In many ways not that much has really changed, has it? In the world of sports football players do a special endzone celebration after they score a touchdown, and basketball players let out a primal scream when they dunk the ball. Braggadocio and an attitude of hey-look-at-me-I'm-the-best-in-the-world are all too common on the field of athletics. In the world of business, it isn't much different. Everything seems to be directed toward profit and productivity, and to remain competitive it feels like there isn't any room for gentleness. The world tells us that to be successful you have to be tough, and if it means bulldozing your way to the top in order to succeed, it doesn't matter what it costs or who gets hurt in the process.

But Jesus told His disciples to be in the world while not being of it. And He called His followers to live in a different way, and it was the way of gentleness. However, gentleness shouldn't be misunderstood as weakness or a lack of internal strength. In fact, from a biblical point of view it means quite the opposite. Gentleness is strength under control. People who are mature in gentleness are strong enough to be gentle, and they understand the power of being tender. Gentleness means having great power but choosing to wield it in a compassionate way for the benefit of others.

The word which is translated "gentleness" in our passage today is the Greek word *prautes*, and at times it is also translated "meekness" depending on the context. The Greeks used the word *prautes* to describe an animal that had been tamed. Picture in your mind a wild horse that has been captured, trained, and disciplined to do exactly what its rider instructs it to do. Think of the power of that animal and how it has been harnessed to run strong and with great beauty. The followers of Jesus who have grown in gentleness are strong in the Lord, so strong they can be gentle.

George Bethune was a theologian in the 19th century. In 1839 he wrote these words, "There may be no grace less prayed for or cultivated in the Christian life than the spirit of gentleness." George's comment is still true today. It is a grace of the Spirit of Christ that is often misunderstood, and it is a character quality of Jesus that for too long has been neglected. And that needs to change. And the reason is whenever you think of Jesus, think gentleness. Let me explain.

II. The Gentleness of Jesus.

There is no better example of gentleness than Jesus Himself, and the apostle Paul held up the gentleness and meekness of Jesus as the basis for his exhortation to the Christians in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 10 the apostle wrote, "*Now, I Paul, myself, entreat you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ*" (10:1). And then he went on to defend the humble manner of his ministry and said that it was built on the example of Jesus.

Gentleness was foretold by the OT prophets to be one of the outstanding aspects of the ministry of the Messiah, and Isaiah 42 says, "*Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights, I have put my Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. ...a bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not extinguish*" (42:1,3).

These verses are quoted again in Matthew 12 where they are applied to Jesus, and it's worth spending a few moments studying this passage and see how Isaiah used these two

figures of speech. The first is that of a cracked, half-broken reed. It is so fragile that it will break in two under rough treatment. But in the hands of the Messiah the reed won't be broken any further. In fact, it will be fully restored. With Jesus no one is beyond repair, and He is gentle with things that are broken in this world.

The second metaphor is that of a flickering wick in an oil lamp. A sudden movement of air will quench the fire and put it out completely. But in the hands of the Messiah, the flame will be protected and safely guarded. He'll cup His hand around the smoldering wick to shield it from the elements and enable the flame to strengthen and grow until it is able again to shine its light for all to see.

According to these verses in Isaiah's prophecy, the gentleness of Jesus is the means by which He will one day bring forth the judgment and justice of God on the earth. In other words, in the final analysis, gentleness actually works, and it will prove to be more effective in subduing kingdoms than trying to do it by force or aggression.

In the New Testament Jesus Himself talked about His own gentleness in Matthew 11, and He said, *"Come to Me, all you who are weary and 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" (11:28-30).*

What a loving invitation Jesus gives to everyone who is weary and feels weighed down by the worries and hardships of life. Jesus is gentle because He knows how hard life can be. He is aware of the anguish in our hearts and the failures and disappointments we experience. With tender loving care He offers to give us rest in Him, and He invites us to learn from His example.

Throughout Jesus' ministry He demonstrated a life of gentleness. Sure, there is the account of Jesus cleansing the Temple, and on a number of occasions Jesus spoke harshly to the Pharisees and He criticized them for their hypocrisy. But more often than not, Jesus dealt with people in a tender and gentle way, especially those who were mistreated by the world and people who were looked down on by society.

There was the time when a woman was caught in adultery and brought to Jesus. Instead of adding to her embarrassment and shame, He said, *"Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more" (John 8:11).* When the disciples tried to prevent parents from bringing their children to Jesus in order for Him to bless them, Jesus said, *"Let the little children come to Me, and don't forbid them. For to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Mk. 10:11).*

When He rode into Jerusalem at His Triumphal Entry, Jesus came riding not as a conquering hero on a war horse but as the Suffering Servant on a donkey so that the prophecy would be fulfilled, *"Behold, your king is coming to you, gentle, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden" (Mt. 21:5).* Then after the resurrection, when Jesus met with Peter and the other disciples by the Sea of Galilee, the Lord restored Peter and forgave His disciple for denying Christ on three occasions, and He simply asked Peter three times, *"Do you love Me, do you love Me, do you love Me?" (Jn. 21:15-19).* Then He recommissioned Peter and called him to follow Jesus and to feed His sheep.

How might you and I emulate Jesus' life of gentleness, and how can we follow His example? How do we cultivate this virtue of gentleness in our own lives in the power of God's Spirit? That's the final thing I want to talk about this morning.

III. How to Cultivate a Spirit of Gentleness.

A gentle spirit comes from having an accurate view of oneself and of others. We must see ourselves as helpless sinners saved by a gracious and loving God, because if it wasn't for the gentleness and kindness of our Lord, we would be lost in our sins and without any hope. Think about the gentleness of God in His dealings with you. The Bible says that it was while we were yet sinners, indifferent and wandering from God, that Christ died for us, and God didn't deal with us according to what we deserved. In gentleness and love He ransomed our souls and wiped the slate clean so we could begin again and have a fresh start. If that's how God deals with us, shouldn't we deal with other people with a similar gentleness?

Cultivating a spirit of gentleness is to train our minds to regard the lives of the people around us as being precious and valuable in God's sight. If you were given a fragile piece of porcelain china so rare and costly that it was considered irreplaceable, how gentle would you be and how carefully would you handle it? Whenever someone places a new-born baby in your arms, how careful and gentle are you to make sure you don't drop the baby or do anything that might hurt the child?

Everyone you meet is of priceless value because each person is made in the image of God, and they are so precious to the Lord that Jesus died for each one of them. As Christians we should regard every person as having a sign pasted on them which reads, "Fragile! Priceless! Handle with care!" God invites us to follow the example of Jesus to be gentle with all people, especially those who are vulnerable and weak.

The final thing I would say about how to cultivate a spirit of gentleness is to follow Jesus' admonition to treat others as you would want them to treat you. Put yourself in the other person's shoes, and when it comes time to bring correction, or express concern, or to pull them up short for how they've messed up in life, do it in a manner that is in keeping with how you would want to be corrected and disciplined.

It's easy to act out of anger when we are offended or when we're wronged by someone and to respond by using our power when dealing with other people. But God says that the way of gentleness is a better approach to living the Christian life. Gentleness diffuses conflict, and it's an antidote to anger. It disarms our critics, and it's persuasive and attractive. It earns the respect of others, and it communicates love. It is a witness to unbelievers, and it makes us more like Jesus.

Over the weekend Cyndy and I watch a special on TV about the massacre that took place in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921. That was 100 years ago last week. The Burning of Black Wall Street is one of the worst examples of mob violence against people of color in our nation's history, and I found myself embarrassed and becoming angry that something like this could happen in our country and be covered up for so long. It's easy in the fight against racism and injustice to become angry. And it's easy to get offended even when just talking about race regardless of where you come down on the subject.

But then I remembered something that Martin Luther King, Jr. said many years ago. In 1955, during the bus boycott in Montgomery, Dr. King was unfairly blamed for not reaching an agreement with the city officials. And he wrote these words in his autobiography. "That Monday I went home with a heavy heart. I was weighed down by a terrible sense of guilt, remembering that on two or three occasions I had allowed myself to become angry and indifferent. I had spoken hastily and resentfully. Yet I knew this was no way to solve a problem.

‘You must not harbor anger,’ I admonished myself. ‘You must be willing to suffer the anger of the opponent, and yet not return anger.’”²

Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that the best way to work for justice was with gentleness, not out of anger. And he also knew that this was the calling of Jesus on his own personal life as a follower of Christ. That’s why he urged everyone who worked for civil rights to resist the temptation to anger, and he advocated non-violence in his fight for justice. This did not please many of his contemporaries who were more radical in their approach. Dr. King said, “I have decided to stick with love, because hate is too great a burden to bear. And love is the only force that is capable of transforming an enemy to a friend.”

Conclusion.

How does God want you to be gentle in the coming week? And how will God give you an opportunity to respond not with anger but with gentleness instead? It won’t be easy, but God will be so pleased. Be gentle with your spouse and your children. Be gentle with your co-workers. Be gentle with the driver who cuts you off in traffic. And be gentle with the person who is hard to love.

There are many ways you can be gentle in everyday life. Be considerate of other’s feelings. Speak respectfully to everyone. As a parent, discipline your children with a measured and tender response instead of acting out of anger. Seek peace. Be a calm presence. Listen more than you speak and be tender and loving in your dealings with everyone.

The prayer and the practice I would give you as an assignment for the coming week is to wake up every morning and pray these words, “Lord, I give you this day. Build in me the Fruit of gentleness and give me an opportunity to be gentle with someone today.” Then watch for the opportunity to resist anger and instead respond with gentleness, and you’ll see a transformation that God will do in your heart and in your life. I guarantee it. Gentleness is the strength to be compassionate even when it’s hard. Amen.

¹ Some of these observations are taken from a message my friend Charlie Dunn delivered in a sermon in 2020.

² *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. by Clayborn Carson (New York: Warner Books, 1998).