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Life in the Spirit Series (Lesson 16)

Fruit of the Spirit – Gentleness

Our connect group lessons this year will focus primarily on Galatians 5.

In our previous lessons, we learnt about Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness and Faithfulness. In this lesson, we begin our study on the 8th Fruit of the Spirit – Gentleness.

Read: Galatians 5:16-25

Gentleness is very close to patience. It's not surprising to find them both included in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit. What's their similarity and difference?

Well, if patience is the ability to endure hostility and criticism without anger, then gentleness is the ability to endure such things without aggression. Gentleness shows itself when I've learned that the Christlike way to respond to conflicts and quarrels, rejection, unfairness, or harsh words spoken against me, is not with bluster and self-defence, not with harsh and aggressive words, not with angry gestures and facial expressions, not with prickles and spikes—but rather with softness, controlling my tongue and my temper.

Gentleness means being very aware that the other person is a human being with feelings too. And maybe that person, even the one who is being very nasty, is just as hurt as I am by whatever is going on between us. So, if I fight back with matching or increasing aggression, it will only make things worse. We will hurt each other even more, and what's the point in that?

Gentleness doesn't necessarily mean just saying nothing and soaking it up (though sometimes it might—think of Jesus at the time of his trial). A gentle response can also be strong, firm, and clear, but without vicious rage.

Gentleness is also very close to humility, and sometimes they come together. For example, they are the first things Paul mentions when he tells his readers to live lives that are worthy of their calling in the gospel. "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:1-2)

The Gentleness of God in the Old Testament

Gentleness is probably not the first thing you'd think of to describe God in the Old Testament. It often speaks of his incredible power—mighty like the storm, with a voice to melt the mountains. Yet the psalmists and others often speak of God in gentle terms.

David compares God to the gentle shepherd caring for the needs of his sheep in Psalm 23, leading them to calm water for drinking, fresh pasture for feeding, and protecting them through the place of danger.

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Psalm 103 describes God as gentle like a parent who knows that his children are weak and vulnerable. Deuteronomy 1 pictures God as a caring father. He carries his people as a father carries his children, to keep them out of danger.

The Gentleness of Jesus

Jesus's greatest strength was best seen in his gentleness. It doesn't mean that he was a wimp who never raised his voice or stood up to others. On the contrary, Jesus could speak the truth very boldly and confront people with great strength. Jesus did not get aggressive or belligerent when his enemies tried to trick him and even when they falsely accused him. Jesus did not bully or belittle others, and he made time for those whom the rest of society bullied, belittled or rejected.

One of the best illustrations of Jesus's gentle yet firm approach was seen in the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. He was astonishingly gentle, even though it was also direct and truthful. When he tells her she has had five husbands, we often hear his words as a rebuke, or as implying that she was a degraded, promiscuous woman. But while she accepts that it was true, it need not have been due to her own unfaithfulness. Divorce was the man's prerogative in that culture, so she might just as easily have been the victim of male exploitation—used and thrown away by five callous men and now living with a man in an unmarried state. We really can't tell from the text what circumstances had led to her five broken marriages, but whatever they were, Jesus leads her gently to acknowledge her greatest need—the living water from God's Messiah and a right relationship with God “in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23) through Jesus. The fact that he was speaking to her at all, let alone the fact that it was such a gentle, respectful conversation, was a shock to the returning disciples.

The gentleness of Jesus was, of course, tested most severely through his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. When he was arrested, he could have called on twelve legions of angels to protect him, but he didn't (Matthew 26:53-54). When he was facing trials, before the Jewish court and then the Roman one, he could have answered every charge with angry rebuttal, but he remained mostly silent (Matthew 26:63). When they were nailing him to the cross, he could have called down curses on his enemies (as Jeremiah, some psalmists, and some of the martyrs did). But he didn't. Instead, he prayed to his Father to forgive them (Luke 23:34). And in the midst of his agony on the cross, he thought of the needs of his mother and entrusted her to the care of one of his disciples (John 19:26-27).

After the resurrection, think of the gentle way Jesus restored Peter after his appalling failure. Peter had denied Jesus three times, which must have led to unbearable grief, guilt, and remorse. Peter quite probably thought that his days as a trusted disciple of Jesus and leader of the team were over, with no hope of reprieve or restoration. How could he ever face Jesus again? How could Peter ever face the other disciples again when they heard what he had done?

But Jesus did not rebuke Peter or shame him. In fact, Jesus asked Peter three times – “Do you love me?” (John 21:15-17). That was tough—the three questions obviously recalling Peter's three denials. Excruciatingly tough, yes, but it was also gentle.

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And Peter replied, three times, in anguished repentance and in passionate sincerity, that he truly loves Jesus. And that was all Jesus needed to know. So, **Peter the failure** became **Peter the forgiven**—through the gentleness of Jesus. And judging from the Peter we next meet in the book of Acts on the day of Pentecost and beyond, that gentle restoration by Jesus was effective. Peter himself had become a man of gentleness and humility.

Gentleness as the Way of Life

With all these teachings and examples of Jesus, it's not surprising that Paul turned gentleness and humility from being despised qualities in his surrounding culture into prime evidence of the work of the Spirit of Jesus in our lives. The very things the world mocked Paul affirmed as qualities that make us more like Christ.

Paul modelled it himself. He had some pretty tough things to say to the church at Corinth, but he began this way, "By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you..." (2 Corinthians 10:1). He longed for healed relationships and spiritual restoration, and he saw gentleness as the key to that goal—starting with his own gentleness as a model.

When there was failure in the lives of other believers, Paul said "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently" (Galatians 6:1). If only that were the regular normal practice in our churches and Christian organizations! But sadly, when someone falls down in some way, it is more likely they will be judged and rejected, rather than gently restored. There is a place for appropriate church discipline (though it is a terribly difficult area for any church in practice). But whatever form that discipline takes, Paul says it must be done in gentleness. Those who are filled with the Spirit (or who claim to be), must demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit, including gentleness, in dealing with those who fail or fall—just as Jesus himself did.

Paul also makes this a particular command— "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24-25). How very different is that from the way some Christians behave? And what about those who write comments on other people's blogs? So often they are quarrelsome, unkind, and resentful. And yet, unless we set an example of such gentleness, how can we expect the rest of God's people to be like that?

Paul went further and turned this quality of gentleness into a general principle that should govern all our relationships—it's not just for leaders. Here's what Paul told Titus to teach his people: "Remind the people to... be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone." (Titus 3:1-2).

Many of us need a lot of reminding of that. When you think of the most outspoken, most blogged, most celebrated, most published, most followed Christians of your country or culture, would gentleness be among the most noticeable things about them that spring to your mind?

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Peter, who must have often remembered how gently Jesus dealt with him, tells us that this should be an important quality of the way we speak to people who are not yet Christians, perhaps especially when we are engaging with people of other faiths. That's probably the reason why he said "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with **gentleness** and respect" (1 Peter 3:15).

Again, it needs to be asked: Is this characteristic of the way Christians engage in evangelistic encounters? And when you think of the way Christians in your culture respond to criticism or challenges or persecution or mockery, would you put gentleness and respect high up on the list of the ways they speak and behave?

Where does this kind of gentleness come from? Well, we might reply, it is the fruit of the Spirit. Yes indeed. It is the character of Jesus living within us. But I think that in practical day-to-day terms, the deepest root of this kind of gentleness is genuine humility. And by humility, I mean the deep awareness that I am just as human and flawed and tempted as anyone else. I really have no reason to feel superior and get aggressive when other people show their flaws and failings. Not if I know my own heart.

So, when somebody else makes a mistake, drops something, loses the keys, forgets to do what they promised or generally messes things up—things that happen to all of us at some point in life—at that moment try not to lose temper and rage at them, shouting angry words of accusation and blame. No, control that instinctive response, because we must remind ourselves (often just in time) that it could just as easily have been me making that mistake. And if it had been me, how would I want others to respond to my foolishness or weakness or mistakes?

Humility comes a lot easier when you really know yourself, when you know the weak and flawed person who is living inside the shell you have on the outside. Then, out of that deep well of self-knowledge and gratitude for the grace of God that has rescued you from your own sin and failure, comes humility before God and gentleness towards others.

If God has been gentle and gracious to me, and if I would like other people to be gentle with me when I mess up, then let me pray to be like that to them. As a forgiven sinner myself, let me welcome others to the fellowship of the forgiven. Let the gentle fruit of the Spirit ripen in my life and relationships.

Reflection/Discussion:

- 1) When do you personally find it most difficult to exercise gentleness to others, and why?**
- 2) As a leader, how can you exercise leadership with humility and gentleness?**