

“The Spirit’s Fruit (Part 8): Gentleness”

Psalm 23, Isaiah 40:1–40:2, Isaiah 40:11–40:11, Isaiah 40:28–40:31,
Galatians 5:22–5:23, 1 Thessalonians 2:1–2:12

Fruits Foreign to Gentleness

Brene Brown has a wonderful little saying. When it comes to interacting with people, and especially people you are leading she says: “Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.”

If people leave a meeting, or finish reading an email, and they’re unclear about what you’re asking them to do, she says, you’re being unkind. But if you’re crystal clear—even if you’re correcting someone, or giving them a difficult assignment—you have done a great kindness to them by making things very clear.

My boss in Korea often explained to our 150-member international staff that there were three kinds of things he might tell us about an aspect of our work. He gave ideas, suggestions, and directives. Ideas were just ideas. Suggestions carried some weight. Directives were explicit orders. He was so good at being clear. Clear is kind.

Here’s the thing, though: much of the time, our lives consist not in professional situations with organizational charts and chains of command. There are some days when I think that being a pastor is tough, because a church is full of volunteers. Almost all the work is done by volunteers. You can have a fancy title like “Senior Pastor,” but you can’t fire anyone! People can *quit*, and they can fire you, but you can’t fire them!

And actually, the real work of a church happens not when a team is trying to organize itself and do a task. The real work of a church happens when a sister or brother is having a sisterly or brotherly conversation with you, and you are both trying to encourage one another to grow in God’s grace.

I won’t call it a fake fruit. But the Spirit’s fruit of gentleness is different from the kind clarity of the workplace. In fact, even in the workplace, someone goes from a leader or a boss to something like a mentor when they go beyond mere kind clarity and demonstrate *gentleness* toward you. Kind clarity can smooth out your work. Gentleness can change your heart and change your life.

But like we said a few weeks ago, a lot of religious folks develop a sort of *niceness* that is really different than both kindness and gentleness. Since a religious community is a voluntary association, you can’t go bossing people around. You can’t really *direct* people to do things. So you learn a little bit of *savvy*. If Teddy Roosevelt said “speak softly and carry a big stick,” church folks learn to speak softly and carry a big *hint*. Folks learn to be indirect, but just as assertive. Oftentimes we just avoid having a tough conversation. Conversations that would be professionally necessary in the workplace are utterly avoided, because, well, we’re religious, and we’re *nice*. And besides, most everyone is just a volunteer. Many people will *leave* a church, without telling anyone, all because they are frustrated, they are tired of being nice, and they

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don’t have the emotional competence to have an honest conversation. A couple years later, they’ll leave their *new* church for the same reason.

We don’t need mere kind clarity. We definitely don’t need mere niceness. Because we need more than a smooth, productive workflow. We need more than the appearance of a conflict-free zone. We need the Spirit’s fruit of gentleness.

The Spirit’s Fruit of Gentleness

Jerry Bridges says that when someone is bearing the Spirit’s Fruit of gentleness, other people can be at ease around them. It’s a lot of work, emotionally, to keep from being emotional. When you’re around people who are not safe, either because they are all business, or because they are superficially, but not sincerely, nice, your emotions are working overtime to keep from showing themselves.

But when you are around someone whose life exhibits the fruit of gentleness, something amazing happens:

You are at *ease*, even though your emotions are free to engage.

You are safe, even though your heart is exposed.

You are able to be vulnerable and honest, even in the midst of a genuine conflict.

Why? Because, as Billy Graham once said, a gentle person “displays a sensitive regard for” you, and is “careful never to be unfeeling toward” you.

The more someone grows in grace and bears the Spirit’s fruit, the less intimidating it is to be around them, and to be spiritually and emotionally honest around them. Because they do not have any need to parade their supposed spiritual maturity around, and certainly have no need to make you feel less spiritual than they are.

Being gentle is so much more than being well-mannered. There are a thousand ways to avoid giving offense. But not all of them lead people into a place where they can be honest about what they think, where they are, what they feel, and where they want to go from here.

Being gentle is so much more than conveying accurate information. There are a thousand ways to teach people true things about God and about the world. But not all of them offer people a context in which they can stand, in the world that God made, and honestly address God with disappointments, sorrows, and hope.

Aristotle was one of the few ancient writers who thought gentleness was important. He used the same Greek word for it that we find throughout the New Testament. But for Aristotle, gentleness was a compromise. He recognized that being explosively angry wasn’t healthy, and

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ignoring bad stuff wasn’t healthy either. So he asked, what’s right in the middle of these vices? His answer: gentleness. Halfway between two vices is your virtue.

Most of the ancient world, though, and especially the Greco-Roman world at the time of Jesus and of Paul, had no interest in gentleness. The world was dominated by men, of course. And boastfulness and brashness was considered normal, even manly. Gentleness was for women, *maybe*. Definitely not for men. It’s like all the men of the ancient world had grown up watching exclusively violent Westerns. There was no “clear is kind” professionalism. There was no religious “niceness.” There was faux-hypermasculine toughness, roughness, brashness, boastfulness. In other words, there was hardly a context in which people could be emotionally at ease at the same time that they were able to be emotionally vulnerable. There was hardly a safe place in which to *grow*. To become more deeply human.

Paul’s Gentleness

In comes Paul the Apostle. This man is not a wimp. He’s ready to leave all his social standing behind, to let go of all the prestige he enjoyed as a religious leader, and follow Jesus. He’s ready to leave his familiar Jewish context behind and run all over the Greco-Roman world to announce to Gentiles that his Jewish Messiah was risen from the dead. He’s been beaten, shipwrecked, mocked, ostracized, falsely accused, tried, and chased out of town. In fact, he was chased out of Phillipi just before he came to start this church in Thessalonica (2). This guy is no wimp.

And at the same time, Paul is ready to set off an unexpected revolution in the ancient world. Not only is he going to insist that women have full standing with men as citizens of the kingdom of God in Christ. He’s also going to fully embrace all the essentially human virtues that we think of as stereotypically feminine.

He says to the church in Thessalonica: I love and long for you. You know how I was affectionately desirous of you (8). I didn’t give you good news only, but my very *self* along with it. You were just so dearly treasured.

A gentle person is not afraid to say “I love you.” And to give oneself to sisters and brothers, just like true siblings would. Because the Spirit convinces us that our elder brother Jesus was prepared—because of his great love for us—to say “I love you” with his own life. Once you’re in the family by the Spirit, the Spirit makes you more and more like Jesus. Paul is getting there. Are you?

And Paul, though he’s tough as nails, tells this church that his countenance and posture toward them was gentle like a nursing mother (7). This might be my favorite verse in the Bible, because as a man, it liberates me to keep being as tough as I need to be, while also being as tender as my wife was when she took each of our infant sons in her arms and fed them from her breasts. The Spirit convinces men that they must and can be as gentle as this. The Spirit teaches women that

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they can embrace this so-called feminine virtue, even while they develop Christlike toughness, rather than trying to overcome it. I want to be like nursing mother Paul when I grow up to be a real man. What about you? This is the Spirit’s fruit.

And finally, even when Paul exhorted and challenged and charged the church to greater faith and faithfulness, he did so *how?* Like a loving father (11): encouraging them. Good dads are gentle, even when they’re challenging their kids. The Heavenly Father is challenging us to greater gentleness today. But he’s doing it gently, with great encouragement.

Conclusion

You should develop the tools that make you a good team player. Learn to be clear. That’s kind. You should probably be known as a nice person. But the Lord God wants more. The Father wants gentleness from us.

Know what he did to make sure we’d get it? He gave it. Jesus is the very fatherly gentleness of God in human flesh. Jesus is the big-brotherly gentleness, looking out for your needs and keeping very aware of your weaknesses and your vulnerability. Jesus is the gentle welcome to come and nurse at the bosom of your creator. When we read that God so loved the world that he sent his son not to condemn the world but to save it, we are reading the stunning story of the great gentleness of the most powerful God.

Gentleness has come to us in person. In Jesus. From the Father. By the Spirit.

And gentleness is the fruit that the Spirit wants in us, that we might imitate the Son and glorify the Father in our attitudes, words, and actions toward one another.

Are you committed to bearing the fruit of gentleness? You’d better be. Because the Spirit is committed to making it happen in you, and it would be foolish to try to frustrate the Spirit of God!