



The Healing Power of Gentleness in Our Life Together Life Together: Cultivating Covenant Community Series #4

Proverbs 15:1-4

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Today we will be focusing on another aspect in our series, “Life Together: Cultivating Covenant Community.” It’s one of the most neglected virtues among Christians today. Jonathan Edwards wrote about it in his diary. On February 16, 1725, he said, “A virtue which I need in a higher degree to give beauty and luster to my behavior is gentleness. If I had more of an air of gentleness, I should be much mended.”

How true that is! Edwards said, “Gentleness, that lamblike, dovelike spirit and temper, is the true and distinguishing disposition of the hearts of Christians.” Now, would you have chosen gentleness as the true and distinguishing disposition of the hearts of Christians? Is that what you would have picked? When was the last time anyone told you, “I want you to become a more gentle person”? Have you prayed lately for God to make you gentler? Can you think of a recent experience where you thanked someone or thanked the Lord Himself for expressing gentleness to you?

The Gentleness Quiz

Let’s take a quiz to see if we think biblically about gentleness.

Question #1: True or false? Gentleness is great sometimes for some people, but it’s not for everyone.

That is false. In the Bible, gentleness is not a gift of the Spirit for a few; it is the fruit of the Spirit for all Christians. We find it in Galatians 5:22-23, listed among the fruit of the Spirit. All of that fruit—the whole cornucopia—is to be evident in the life of every Christian. We should not think, “I’m glad some Christians are gentle.” No, all Christians should be gentle. This is the true and distinguishing disposition of the hearts of Christians.

Listen to Ephesians 4:1-3. After Paul laid forth a glorious doctrine of the gospel in chapters one through three, he turned to the walk of the Christian—the way we should live. Listen to the first thing he says: *“I therefore [in light of all that I’ve said about God’s glorious grace in Christ from before the foundation of the world], a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...”* What is the first aspect of that worthy walk? Paul continued, *“... with all humility and gentleness, with patience...”* This is how important gentleness is in the life of a Christian.

In Colossians 3:12, Paul listed gentleness as part of our essential clothing as Christians. We should not go home without it. We are naked without being clothed in gentleness. Paul said, *“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness [or gentleness], and patience...”*

Therefore, gentleness should be the aroma of our lives as Christians. Dane Ortlund calls it “a certain fragrance about us that hangs over all we do, sweetening our words, our actions and our countenance.” How beautiful! So the answer to the first question is “false.” Gentleness is not just great sometimes for some people; it is for all Christians.

Question #2: True or false? You can only afford to be gentle when you are not trying to accomplish anything significant. After all, if you want to start a business and effectively lead it with strength, you can’t be gentle, can you? If you have a dictator breathing down your neck and you need to go to war, you are not going to be looking for a gentle general to command the troops, are you? You can only afford to be gentle when you are not trying to accomplish anything significant, right?

Wrong. False. In the Christian’s life, whatever God calls us to engage in—whether it’s mission, life together in fellowship, or spiritual warfare—we can only move forward in the power of gentleness. We sing about this in the song, “O Church Arise.” We say, “Our battle cry is Love.” Or how about the old hymn that says, “For not with swords loud clashing, nor role of stirring drums / But with deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes”?

Why is it that God will not allow His work to go forward except in the spirit of gentleness? It is because this is the way our Savior is. Listen to Isaiah 42:1-3, when God spoke about His Servant, the Messiah, Who would suffer on behalf of His people. God said, *“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him [notice the Spirit and gentleness go hand-in-hand]; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”*

Now, just pause there for a minute. Is that a big deal to bring forth justice to the nations? Yes, it is a huge task to bring forth justice to the nations. How would the Messiah fulfill the task? Listen to the amazing way He accomplished it: *“He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or*

make it heard in the street [in other words, he's not going to start a riot]; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice."

When He finds a weak, struggling, broken-down and bleeding sinner along the way, He will not trample on him. When He finds someone whose life is flickering out, he fans it into flame. Jesus carries forth His great justice-to-the-nations work in a spirit of gentleness. That is one of the reasons why the Apostle Paul listed gentleness as an indispensable requirement for Christian leaders.

Listen to 2 Timothy 2:24-26:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

So there may be victories in spiritual warfare here, but it is not going to happen through harshness, throwing your weight around or politicking. God's work must always be done with a spirit of gentleness.

Question #3: True or false? You cannot be too gentle.

This, my friends, is true. You can never have too much of this fruit of the Spirit. You cannot be too gentle. My guess would be that most men especially would say, "Well, I may take a little bit of gentleness, but it's not a trait I want to have a whole lot of in my life." Would we say that of any other fruit of the Spirit? Would we say, "I don't want to have too much love"? Or, "I don't want to have too much joy"? Or, "I don't want to have too much peace"? Too much patience? Too much kindness? Too much goodness? No way! Or how about, "I don't want to have too much faithfulness," or, "I don't want to have too much self-control"? We would not say that of any other fruit of the Spirit, but I think there is a little fear in our hearts that we become too gentle.

The Holy Spirit is not afraid of that. He is not concerned that you will get out of balance if He gives you too much gentleness. We are afraid of gentleness because it has gotten a reputation for being borderline wimpy, effeminate and spineless. But Who is our model of manhood? Who is the true man *par excellence*? Is it not our Lord Jesus Christ? Is it not striking that, in all four Gospels, the only place where Jesus opened up His heart, revealing to us what is at the radiating core of His being, is in Matthew 11:28-30? He said, "*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 said there is one thing He wants you to know about His inward disposition. He wants us to know that He is gentle and lowly in heart. He will not crush the bruised reed. He will not quench the dimly burning wick. He says, “I will be gentle in the way I lead you, teach you and receive you. You will find rest for your souls when you come to Me. I am gentle. I am lowly in heart. You do not need to be threatened by coming to Me. I came to you as a Baby.” Jesus is saying you can come to Him because He is gentle. He will not crush you.

Dane Ortlund says, “When we come to speak of gentleness in the Christian life, we are talking about embodying Who Jesus is. To be Christ-like is to be, if nothing else, gentle.” That’s quite a statement! So apparently, gentleness has nothing to do with wimpiness, effeminacy or spinelessness. Rather, it has often been said that gentleness is strength under control.

I remember when our daughter, Ruth, was born. She had a brother who was almost four years old and this became one of the most commonly used words in our household. We would say, “Gentle! Gentle! Don’t hurt the baby.” Take that strength and make sure it is under control so that you can be a helpful servant to someone else. Gentleness is strength under control.

Gentleness Illustrated in Proverbs 15:1-4

Turn with me to Proverbs 15:1-4 and as you do so, I’d like you to listen to this old fable from Aesop, called “The Quarrel between the Wind and the Sun.” It goes like this:

Said the wind to the sun, “I’m stronger than you. I’ll prove it. Let’s see which of us can make that plowman out there take off his coat.”

So the wind blew hard, but all his blowing could not drag the coat away. The more he blew, the tighter the farmer would wrap his coat around himself.

“Now,” said the sun gently, “let me try.” He beamed and soon the man exclaimed how hot it is! Then he unbuttoned his coat. Soon after, he threw it open; and at last, off came the coat.

The moral of the story is that you can accomplish more by warmth and gentleness than you can by force and harshness which cause the layers of self-protection to come off. Harshness hardens; gentleness warms and melts the heart. Gentleness warms a community of believers.

As we look at these simple verses from Proverbs, my aim is to see us, as a community, desire this grace of gentleness in our lives more. I want you to see how delicious this fruit is. It is tasty and healthy. I want you to be saying, “Oh, I want more of this fruit in my life and in our community. I don’t want to look at gentleness as something that is optional, elective, occasional

or to be desired in moderation. Oh, Lord Jesus, burn away the harshness that is in me and clothe me in Your gentleness. May the aroma of Your gentle spirit be the fragrance of my life.”

That’s my aim as we look at these Proverbs. We are going to see:

1. The calming power of gentleness
2. The persuasive power of gentleness
3. The healing power of gentleness.

Let’s read Proverbs 15:1-4:

*A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.
The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.
The eyes of the Lord are in every place,
keeping watch on the evil and the good.
A gentle tongue is a tree of life,
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.*

Now, you might say, “What does that have to do with gentleness?” Three of these four verses deal with our tongue and speech, but verse three does not. It is there for an important reason—to remind us of God’s sovereignty and nearness. God is watching in every place and He will bring justice to pass.

This is similar to what Paul said in Philippians 4 where he said, “The Lord is at hand. Let your gentleness be known to all.” To be gentle, you must have a confidence that God is present and working His purposes out. It is better to leave things in the hands of God than to try to take control through your own harshness. Proverbs 15:3, then, is very important.

The Calming Power of Gentleness

Let’s think about the calming power of gentleness for a few minutes. It is delicious fruit. It is calming. Verse one says, “*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*” An answer or word that is gentle, tender or delicate is speaking of conciliatory tone. God’s Word says, “That kind of speech has the power to turn away wrath and anger.”

One pastor said, “Gentleness can make the anger that is in others do an about-face instead of an in-your-face. Gentleness tends to suffocate the anger so that it cannot breathe out its fiery threats.”

That’s so good! We need anger to be suffocated so that it cannot breathe out its fiery threats. Gentleness can do that. It suffocates anger and turns away wrath. Now, this doesn’t mean that we should withhold from speaking the truth to one another or that we should water down the truth. We must confront sin and error. We must rebuke, reprove and exhort. All of

these things are necessary, but remember what Paul said. We must do these things with patience and careful instruction. How we speak the truth matters just as much as what we are saying. We must speak with gentleness.

When we communicate truth harshly, there is a real sense that we are no longer communicating the truth. Your tone of voice and gestures matter; how willing you are to listen matters; the way you say your words matters; the words you choose matter. You could speak truth harshly or gently, and there is a world of difference in terms of the effect your words have.

How many church divisions could have been avoided if Christians cared more about gentleness? How many schisms, quarrels, fights and divisions could be avoided if we were just as concerned about how we speak and care for others as we are about speaking the truth? So many times, people are willing to blow up a fellowship of Christians because of a zeal for the truth. We think we stand for what is right and true, but we must beware of these words from Jonathan Edwards: “Zeal for the truth is the most easily corrupted virtue of Christians.”

Too often we are more concerned about being seen as right than we are about the truth. Zeal for the truth cares about God’s honor. Being seen as right cares about my honor. These are mixed up very easily. One test to see if your zeal for the truth is godly is whether it is accompanied by gentleness or by harshness of speech.

Listen to what David Brainerd, the great missionary to the Native Americans, wrote in his journal: “Oh, the pride, selfishness, hypocrisy, ignorance, bitterness, party zeal and the lack of love, candor, meekness and gentleness that have attended my attempts to promote religion and virtue!”

If we are honest, those ugly characteristics often motivate our campaigns for truth and righteousness as well. It could be a single harsh word; a word designed to wound another person. Or a posting on Facebook that is not thought through carefully and worded with gentleness can have the power to escalate a conflict.

“Why don’t you just get your act together?”

“What’s your problem?”

“Why do you always have to act like that?”

“You’re just like _____. You never change!”

Comparisons, sarcasm, criticism and demeaning comments wound. God gave us two gates—the teeth and the lips—to keep words from exiting. When we are angry, we need to get those gates shut until we are ready to speak with gentleness. Otherwise, it can do great harm.

Remember the story in 1 Kings 12 of Rehoboam, King Solomon’s son, and how the older men wisely urged him to speak gently to the people. However, the younger men said, “No, don’t

be gentle. You can't afford to be too gentle with them." And he took the younger men's advice and spoke with harshness, and the kingdom was split. So you can trace the division of Israel back to a lack of gentleness.

There are many things we could think about practically to get this gentleness—this calming way in our lives—but it really must come from the working of the Holy Spirit, from the gospel and from the goodness of God in us. How do you hear the tone of God's voice when He speaks to you? What do you hear from God? Do you hear a harsh tone? Do you hear a berating voice? Do you hear a God Who is always displeased with you, always angry, always disappointed? Or do you hear Isaiah 40:1-2 which says, "*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.*"

When you hear God's voice, do you hear a God Who says, "I am more than satisfied. No fear of My wrath needs to trouble you any longer, for Jesus has paid in full for your sins. I am now free to speak to you with tenderness, gentleness, love and mercy"? The way you speak to others is ultimately a reflection of the way you hear God speaking to you. If you hear a gentle, tender tone drenched in the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on your behalf, that gentleness you're hearing from God in the gospel is going to be reflected in gentle speech toward others. But if you hear harshness, if you hear a God Who is never satisfied, if you hear a God Who did not send His Son into the world in order that we might not be condemned, then you will be harsh. You won't be very gentle.

Listen to the tone of God's voice in the gospel. Recognize how gentle He is to us and let that be reflected in your speech. It will have a calming and unifying effect on our community.

The Persuasive Power of Gentleness

Proverbs 15:2 says, "*The tongue of the wise commends knowledge* [the tongue adorns knowledge or makes knowledge acceptable] *but the mouths of fools pour out folly.*" It is very possible to know a lot about theology, the Bible and the gospel yet have no wisdom in how to present it. The Bible, especially here in Proverbs, says you can commend the truth and adorn the gospel, or you can make it repelling and sound like folly by the way you speak to others about it.

"*The tongue of the wise commends knowledge.*" The Apostle Peter tells us how to do this in 1 Peter 3:15: "... [B]ut in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect..." It is not putting people down, belittling them, yelling and screaming or

condemning, but listening to people, taking them seriously and loving them. If we cannot speak the gospel with gentleness and respect, it's probably not the gospel. We must always do it with gentleness and respect.

The late Robin Williams once said he walked past a Christian protest populated by purple-faced screamers. Some of them were holding signs that said, "You will not enter the Kingdom of God!" Williams concluded, "If people like this are included in the Kingdom, it doesn't sound like the kind of place I would care to be in anyway." When there is no gentleness or respect, it makes even true statements sound like folly. It makes them grating. It does not commend knowledge when we speak without gentleness and respect.

Where would we be today if Jesus had not been gentle toward us? We must know where our power lies. We must put our confidence in the gospel, not in the harshness of our words, the strength of our arguments or the vehemence with which we can speak. The power lies in the gospel itself.

Paul Tripp says:

We don't have the power to change hearts. Only God can do that. It's never the loudness of our voices, the power of our words, the drama of the moment, the creativity of our illustrations, the strength of our vocabulary, the specter of our threats, or the grandeur of our gestures that causes a turning within people... God can use whispered words to produce thunderous conviction in our hearts... Gentleness flows from knowing where our power lies.

The power is in God's Word and in His gospel. Gentleness flows when we stand under the power of this Word and lovingly communicate its truths to people, within the church and outside in the community.

The Healing Power of Gentleness

In your Care Group and in your mission to the community, there are many people suffering, wounded and broken because of the harshness they've experienced from others. Words have cut them like sword thrusts. Gentle words can heal. Look at verse four. It says, "*A gentle tongue is a tree of life...*" What a beautiful image!

In Revelation 22:1-2, we read:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its

twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Get that picture in your mind as you read this proverb. A gentle tongue is a tree of life. It is always bearing fruit for the healing of the nations, for the healing of broken people in your lives. A gentle tongue can heal.

I cannot think about this without thinking of my dear pastor, John Sale. Every time I speak with him, his words are healing to me. He is such a gentle, gentle man. He is a strong and forceful man, but he is always, always, always a gentle man. His words are healing. They bring life.

A perverse tongue is a tongue that twists words so that they serve our own evil intents. Self-centered speech crushes the spirits of people. This proverb is telling us that our words can bring health to the physical body. And they can bring health to the spiritual body, the church community. They can be sweet to the soul and healing to the bones (Proverbs 16:24). They can be life to those who find them and healing to all their flesh (Proverbs 4:22). But rash words are like sword thrusts (Proverbs 12:18).

You don't want a surgeon who handles the scalpel like a butcher knife. You don't want a Christian who handles the Bible like a butcher knife, but who handles it to heal. How do we do that? We must be more concerned about the person to whom we are speaking than we are about ourselves. Harshness comes from being concerned more about self than about the other person.

Paul Tripp says, "Gentle talk does not come from a person who is angry and looking to settle the score. It comes from the person who is speaking not because of what he wants from you but what he wants for you." Who always speaks not because of what He wants from us but for us? Our God, in the gospel of His Son, always speaks because He is for us.

I am only able to speak gently when I am not speaking out of personal hurt, anger and bitterness. I must speak out of self-sacrificing, redemptive love. I speak to you not because your sin has affected me, but because it has ensnared you. I long to see you free from its snare. I'm not on a mission of selfish confrontation but loving rescue.

Ask yourself these questions: Is my life in this church community marked more by what I want from people or what I want for people? Am I a gentle healer?

As Jonathan Edwards said, we need more of this lamblike, dovelike spirit and temper. Remember, he said, "A virtue which [we] need in a higher degree, to give beauty and luster to [our] behavior, is gentleness. If [we] had more of an air of gentleness, [we] should be much mended."

May God be pleased to give it to us as we pray.

Great God, our loving Heavenly Father, we are praying that You would fill us with the meekness and gentleness of Your Son, Jesus. We need Your strength working in us. It's not just knowing the truth and it is not by our own efforts that we can acquire this kind of gentleness. It must be the fruit of Your Spirit in our lives. We plead with You to fill us with the Spirit of Jesus, Your gentle Son, that we may bear His fragrance in this world. May His aroma of gentleness characterize our lives. We thank You that we see in Him Your gentleness to us, Father. As a Father has compassion on His children, so You, Lord, have compassion on those who fear You. For You know our frame. You know that we are but dust. I pray that we would also know that about one another, that it would make us tender, gentle and peaceable in our words and actions toward each other. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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