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Let Your Gentleness Be Known To Everyone Philippians 4:5

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*“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”*

There are times in my life when I wonder if I am accomplishing anything devoting myself to preaching and teaching because sometimes I will talk about a subject, like gentleness, and immediately afterward someone will act or speak in a harsh or condemning fashion. I feel as if I might as well have been speaking Swahili, because there is no personal application, even the day the words were spoken, they were left harmlessly on the church floor as people leave.

One time I led a Bible Study in Ocean Park, Maine on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. The last day was about chapter four and I talked about this verse, *“Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”* In addition to Jill, my father came to the Bible study each morning and my mother was also there on the last morning. We walked home afterwards and when we got to my parents’ cottage, one of their dogs was on their bed. My father was angry about this and he proceeded to hit Keke with his Bible while I said to no avail, *“Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”* My father, sensing my disapproval and perhaps feeling a little embarrassed said something like, *“I thought she needed a strong dose of the word.”*

Now I know it may not seem gentle to share a story like that about my dad when he is not here to defend himself, but I was used in illustrations by him for years so don’t feel badly. As I have reflected on that brief episode, it occurred to me how characteristic my dad’s response has been for Christians and the church, especially as we are perceived by those, like Keke, who are not Christian themselves. Called to imitate the gentleness of Jesus, we are far more adept at responding in an angry, harsh, condemning, judgmental fashion. It seems some Christians find it easier to be angry about the sins and failings of others than to gently try to love them in Jesus’ name. A University of California study demonstrated that 93% of verbal communication occurs through sound (inflection, tonality, voice variety, emphasis, and energy) and look (which includes the speaker’s appearance, gestures, movements, and visual aids). Only 7% of the communication is the content. If one were to analyze the tone, facial expressions, and body language of people who are professed Christians on television I wonder what message is coming through. 2 Timothy 2:25, tells us we are to be *“correcting opponents with **gentleness**. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth.”* How often do we do this or see this practiced? From what I can see there is not a

lot of correcting opponents with gentleness in our culture. Sinners were comfortable in the presence of Jesus, who is holier than any of us, because the message they clearly got from him was a message of gentle love and acceptance that encouraged, enabled, and inspired them to repent. Jesus said (Matthew 11:29), *“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am **gentle** and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”*

Gentleness has fallen on hard times. It almost seems gentleness isn't seen as a desirable quality any more. Men and women want to be strong, assertive, and tough. Who wants to be known as gentle? “Gentleman” used to be a term to describe a man who had learned how to act respectfully and properly with other people. Now we no longer identify people as “ladies and gentlemen,” terms that at least had hopefully a *little* to do with one's behavior and conduct, but as “men and women,” or “you guys.”

But gentleness is a fruit of the spirit, a Christian virtue, we are to cultivate, develop, and pursue. 1 Timothy 6:11 tells us to, *“pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, **gentleness**.”*

One day a young man was walking along an isolated road when he heard something like a crying sound. He couldn't tell for sure what the sound was, but it seemed to be coming from underneath a bridge. As he approached the bridge, the sound got louder and then he saw a pathetic sight. There, lying in the muddy river bed, was a puppy about two months old. It had a gash on its head and was covered with mud. Its front legs were swollen where they had been tightly bound with cords.

The young man was immediately moved with compassion and wanted to help the dog, but as he approached, the crying stopped and the dog snarled his lip and started to growl. But the young man didn't give up. He sat down and started gently talking to the dog. It took a long time but eventually the dog stopped growling and the man was able to inch forward and eventually touch the dog and began unwrapping the tightly bound cord. The young man carried the dog home, cared for its wounds, gave it food and water and a warm bed. Even with all of this, the dog continued to snarl and growl every time its savior approached, but the young man continued to treat the dog with gentle kindness.

Weeks went by and the man continued caring for the puppy. Then one day as the man approached, the dog wagged its tail. Consistent love and gentle kindness had won and a lifelong friendship of trust and loyalty began.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Gray, *Stories for the Heart & More Stories for the Heart*, Multnomah Books, Sisters, OR, 1996, 98.

In our relationships, whether parents with children, grandparents and grandchildren, husbands and wives, friends, or even animals - gentleness is a greatly desired and highly effective quality. It is like oil lubricating an engine. A good mechanic will tell you changing the oil in your car every 3,000 miles is the single most important thing you can do for the long-term care of your engine. Regular preventative maintenance with gentleness in our words and deeds, is one of the most important things we can do for the long-term care of smooth running relationships.

James 3:13, 17, *"Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with **gentleness** born of wisdom... the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, **gentle**, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."*

The parents of a young son wanted to teach him responsibility so they required him to phone home when he arrives at a friend's house a few blocks away. He began to forget, however as he grew more confident in his ability to get there safely. The first time he forgot, his dad called to be sure he had arrived. He was told the next time it happened, he would have to come home. The father continued, "A few days later, however, the telephone again lay silent, and I knew if he was going to learn he would have to be disciplined. But I didn't want to punish him. I went to the telephone, regretting that his great time would have to be spoiled by his lack of contact with his father. As I dialed, I prayed for wisdom. *"Treat him like I treat you,"* the Lord seemed to say. With that, as the telephone rang one time, I hung up. A few seconds later the phone rang, it was my son. *"I'm here, Dad!" "What took you so long to call?"* I asked. *"We started playing and I forgot. But Dad, I heard the phone ring once and I remembered."* *"I'm glad you remembered,"* I said. *"Have fun."*

How often does our own lack of gentleness reflect our mistaken belief in a God who enjoys punishing us when we fail to do what we should? The truth is it takes a lot more strength to be gentle than it does to lash out in anger.

When Paul tells us to let our gentleness be known to everyone, he is reminding us that people, especially children, are watching us and learning from us all the time, even when we aren't aware of it. An unknown author wrote,

*"When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you hang my first painting on the refrigerator, and I wanted to paint another one.*

*When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you feed a stray cat, and I thought it was good to be kind to animals.*

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw you make my favorite cake just for me, and I knew that little things are special things.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I heard you say a prayer, and I believed there is a God I could always talk to.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I felt you kiss me good night, I felt loved.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw tears come from your eyes, and I learned that sometimes things hurt, but it's all right to cry.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I saw that you cared, and I wanted to be everything that I could be.

When you thought I wasn't looking, I looked...and wanted to say thanks for all the things I saw when you thought I wasn't looking."<sup>2</sup>

The fact of the matter is people are always looking and we learn from what we see and experience.

Gentleness is the fruit of the spirit others need from us especially when they are hurting or have made a mistake. Isn't it nice to experience gentleness from others when we have done something wrong or when we're hurting?

Paul wrote in Galatians 6:1-2, *"My friends if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a **spirit of gentleness**. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."*

Paul says one of the signs someone has received the Holy Spirit is the ability to minister to and restore someone in a spirit of gentleness, not a spirit of anger. Evelyn Underhill wrote in *The Spiritual Life*, *"All our action must be **peaceful, gentle, & strong**. If we desire a simple test of the quality of our spiritual life, a consideration of the **tranquility, gentleness, and strength with which we deal with the circumstances of our outward life will** serve us better than anything that is based on the loftiness of our religious notions, or fervor of religious feelings."* Gentleness flows from the recognition that we too are tempted, we also transgress and fail in our efforts at becoming like Jesus.

If our heart and spirit are right, when we fail to do what we should, the Holy Spirit will convict and burden us enough, what we need from others is not more condemnation, but gentleness. *"What were you thinking about? How could you!"* These are not gentle

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<sup>2</sup> William J. Bausch, *A World of Stories for Preachers & Teachers*, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT, 327.

phrases. It seems to me one of the qualities of gentleness is the ability to respond calmly instead of with condemnation.

A man related the following story about his wife.

I remember a time when I was sitting on the antique window seat that Helen treasured through the years. Because the original fabric had worn through, Helen had recently recovered it in a handsome corduroy. A heavy storm was in progress, & I sat staring at the rain pelting down on dead autumn leaves. The gloomy look of the garden seemed to match the mood of hopelessness that had come over me. Problems at work had made me fearful of the future. Basic questions that surface with the coming of middle-age had made me fearful of life itself.

I started to light my pipe & accidentally spilled some hot ash which burned a hole right in the center of the window seatcover. Seeing what had happened, Helen calmly threaded a needle & stitched a beautiful flower over the charred spot. When I looked at the finished work, I realized it was a striking symbol of our long life together, & my spirits began to soar. I had married a repairer of broken spirits, a healer of wounds, a woman whose very presence was an antidote to fear. Moreover, I understood, perhaps for the very first time, that it was Helen's deep and abiding trust in God's goodness that made it possible for her to be a source of light & a harbinger of hope in times of darkness & despair.<sup>3</sup>

Ephesians 4:1-2, *"Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and **gentleness**, with patience, bearing with one another in love."* If you have a washing machine, there is a gentle cycle for very delicate items. The machine doesn't spin as hard and it has a lighter rinse so the garment isn't damaged. People also do better when treated with the gentle cycle. I began with a dog story which was kind of the opposite of the television show about the dog whisperer. There was also a movie, *The Horse Whisperer*. There is something to be said for being gentle to preserve relationships and communicate with animals and with other people. Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

### **Prayer: To Be Gentle in Spirit**

O Lord, may I speak with the gentleness of love.

Let me speak with understanding and hope.

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<sup>3</sup> Bausch, 347.

Take away all thought of prejudice and judgment.

Take away doubt, anger, and self searching motives

Purify my heart and mind that my soul may touch

The souls of others with your love.