

James 3:17-18

“Embracing the Gentleness of Jesus”

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Ordinary Time

My sermon this morning will be briefer than normal, and instead of expositing one particular text of God’s word in a more methodical way as I usually do, I will be attempting to weave a theme throughout a number of places in the Scriptures, and that theme is the fruit of the Spirit called gentleness.

Listen now to James 3:17-18 as James describes way in which gentleness is characteristic of the wisdom that comes from God.

*“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”*

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

While I was away this summer, one of the things I did, of course, was think about our church - and not just our church as institution, but think about you: the men, women and children whom I love who are part of this community united in one Faith, one baptism, one Spirit here at Colleyville Pres.

And now I as return from sabbatical and step back into the pulpit, I want to take several Sundays before we return to our series on Hebrews just to focus on some things that I think are important to hold before us as we think about the “culture” of church.

Not so much our formal theological commitments - but how it is that we actually live together with one another.

Now, I'm not preaching on these things because I think we have a particular problem here at Colleyville. Don't misunderstand me.

But I want to speak to these themes because I think they're important - crucially important for our church as we continue to grow and mature together.

This Sunday, I intend to talk about Gentleness. Next week, we'll talk about Unity. The following week, I believe we'll discuss prayer. And there might be one or two other things we focus on from there.

So, this morning: *Gentleness*.

One of the potential negative connotations of "gentleness" today is that it is somehow associated with weakness or passivity.

But if you think for a moment of those people in your life who have most deeply influenced you over the years, I am willing to bet that gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit they share. No, gentleness is not weakness. It is, in some ways, the greatest form of strength.

But what exactly do the Scriptures mean when they speak of gentleness?

Jesus identifies himself as "*gentle and lowly in heart,*" which tells us that gentleness has a deep connection with lowliness, or humility.

Proverbs describes a gentle tongue as "*a tree of life,*" which tells us that our gentleness toward other actually has the capacity to bring life and healing to those around us.

Paul says to the Corinthians when seeking to correct their errors: "*Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?*," which indicates that gentleness is the opposite of aggression and harshness.

In another letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "*I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ,*" which tells us that to be gentle with someone is not to coerce or manipulate your child or your spouse or your friend, but to humbly entreat them, to make yourself vulnerable to them.

James, in the reading we heard a few minutes ago, connects gentleness with purity, peacefulness, being open to reason, being full of mercy, having sincerity.

Some of the metaphors used for gentleness in the Scriptures are very helpful indeed to understand what is meant by this word.

In Isaiah 40, the prophet says that God who made heaven and earth is *gentle* with his people, tending his flock like a shepherd, gathering the lambs in his arms, carrying them in his bosom - carrying them while holding them tight to his breast, even as the Apostle John reclined on the chest of Jesus during their last meal together before his death.

That might be the best picture of gentleness we have in all scriptures.

It seems that embracing gentleness means to steward whatever power and influence and authority we possess (it takes great strength to be a shepherd, after all) - and using all that power and influence and authority to guard and protect and nourish those who are drawn into our lives. To heal rather than harm.

Gentleness means nurturing instead of attacking. Gentleness means protecting others in their weakness, not shaming or ignoring them.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul builds on this image of the gentle Shepherd carrying the lambs of his flock, telling the Thessalonians,

*“We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. Being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own very selves, because you had become very dear to us.”*

Think about that image for a moment, that metaphor Paul uses for gentleness.

Paul says that for him to be a pastor to the Thessalonians meant that he desired to relate to them as a nursing mother relates to her children - to give them not only the gospel, but also to give them his very own self - in the same way that a nursing mother nourishes her child with her own flesh.

This, for Paul, is what it means to be gentle with others - to give himself to others in love that they might be built up and nourished.

These images evoke the vulnerability of gentleness - to be gentle with someone else is to open yourself to them, to put down your guard, to lay down your power, to risk rejection and ridicule and pain.

And yet, gentleness is a way of life that we are called to embrace. It is a fruit the Spirit intends to work in us.

When I think of a church community that is characterized by gentleness, I think of church members who, in their marriages, in their parenting, in the friendships, in their interactions with one another, are slow to be offended, and quick to overlook potential slights.

I think of men and women and children who are eager to forgive the sins of others and humble enough to confess their own offenses, who are merciful and compassionate - even (and perhaps especially) when they are in the right and someone else is in the wrong.

I think of men and women and children who avoid harming others, especially when someone stands before them who is wounded and in need.

There's no passive aggressiveness in gentleness. What you see is what you get. Gentleness is connected to sincerity. To humility. To sharing, as Paul puts it, *our very own selves* with each other.

It's interesting, actually, how frequently Paul talks about gentleness as a crucial attribute for anyone who would hold authority in the church.

He tells Timothy to only choose elders who are "*not violent but gentle*," and tells instructs Timothy that he must be careful in his own pastoral ministry to "*correct his opponents with gentleness*."

Indeed, at the end of his first letter to Timothy, where Paul instructs his son in the faith on what it means to be a pastor, he says that he must "*pursue...gentleness*" - that this is what it means to be a true Man of God.

Certainly, one of the things we should look for, and even *require* in our pastors and elders in particular is gentleness.

And all of these exhortations Paul gives Timothy regarding gentleness are also applicable to any Christian in any kind of authority - whether that is as a father or mother, a husband or wife, a teacher, an employer, a friend in relationship to others.

*But how do we become gentle?*

How does this fruit of the Holy Spirit grow within us and become mature and beautiful over time? How do we become more skilled in the art of gentleness?

I am quite convinced that we cannot become more gentle by gritting our teeth and willing it to happen. No, it does not work like that.

I actually think is this a place where our English language helps us.

Remember, in English, a wild or untrained horse must be *gentled* before is gentle enough to be ridden by others.

A horse must be *gentled* or made gentle by someone else strong enough and patient enough and yes, gentle enough, before it can become gentle for others.

And I believe that the same is true for us.

Before we can become truly gentle ourselves, we must first be gentled by Jesus. Let me say that again. *Before we can become truly gentle ourselves, we must first be gentled by Jesus.*

So how does Jesus go about gentling us?

The primary way, of course, is abiding with Jesus in his gentleness. He makes us gentle as we abide with him and experience and know his gentleness with us.

Listen again to these precious, remarkable words from Jesus about his gentleness for all those who to him.

Beloved, these words are for you.

Jesus says: *“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 Jesus, gentleness was the way he inhabited the world.

Think of Jesus in the darkness when Nicodemus came to him with his questions.

Think of Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well, asking her for something to drink.

Think of him taking the children in his arms and blessing them over and against the disciple’s objections.

Think of Jesus touching the deaf and blind and diseased, again and again, as he healed them.

Think of Jesus on the cross, where we see the true strength of his gentleness, as he forgives his executioners, commends his mother into the care of his friend, and then welcomes the repentant thief into his kingdom even as they both are in the process of dying.

That, beloved, is gentleness. And to learn gentleness ourselves, we must abide with our gentle Savior, we must be gentled by his strong and gentle and persistent hand.

And the longer I live as a Christian, the more I believe that perhaps the primary way that Jesus will make us to grow in gentleness is by leading us into periods of suffering in our lives.

If you meet someone who is truly gentle - an actually gentle spirit, almost without a doubt they will be a person who has been led through periods of deep suffering by the hand of Jesus.

What I'm saying is that I am not sure that a Christian person can truly imitate Jesus in his gentleness unless they have first suffered *with* Jesus, if they have not been first gentled by Jesus through the pain and anguish and confusion of real suffering.

Somehow, when it is blessed by Jesus, our suffering actually makes us gentle in a way we could never have been gentle before.

Part of the reason for this is because we learn obedience and submission to Jesus in the midst of suffering in a way that we can't otherwise.

But I think even more than that the connection between suffering and gentleness is this.

It is very often in our suffering, when we know what it is to suffer loss, to be defeated, to be humbled and confronted with our very real lack control over our lives that we become open in a new way to actually respond to the invitation of our Savior who says to us:

*"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."*

In other words, suffering strips us of our illusions that we are in control, that we can fix ourselves or others, and it readies us to come to our gentle Savior looking for the rest only he can provide in a new way.

And is that new experience of finding our rest in Jesus that comes only by being made gentle by him in suffering that will actually transform us.

Friends, I tell you - if you come to Jesus in your suffering ready to receive his presence in a new way, he will welcome you with open arms.

Indeed, gentleness is something we must learn. We will not develop it naturally.

And we must learn it from Jesus himself, as he gentles us more and more in our lives - in our suffering, in our abiding with him, in our coming to him in our weakness and receiving his gentleness again and again.

Beloved, I long for us to be a church that continues to grow in gentleness.

And I know that Jesus will lead us more and more in that gentleness as we follow him together.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.