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Let Your Gentleness Be Known to Everyone
Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Philippians 4:4-7

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. **Let your gentleness be known to everyone.** The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

There are times in my life when I wonder if I’m accomplishing anything devoting myself to preaching and teaching because sometimes I’ll 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’s no personal application, even the day the words were spoken or even moments afterwards, they’re left harmlessly on the church floor as people leave.

For example, years ago, 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, Keke, 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, “I thought she needed a strong dose of the word.” I know it may not seem gentle to share a story like that about my dad when he isn’t here to defend himself, but he used me in sermon illustrations for years when I was a kid so don’t feel badly, and we’ve laughed about it ever since.

As I’ve 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 Christians themselves. Called to imitate the gentleness of Jesus, we’re far more adept at responding in a reactive, angry, harsh, arrogant, condemning, or judgmental fashion. So many of us are guilty of this, including myself, that I could easily name names... but that wouldn’t be gentle. **Gentleness is the quality of being kind, tender, mild mannered; it is softness of action or effect.** We think of phrases like a gentle reminder, a gentle stream or a gentle breeze.

It seems some Christians find it easier to be angry about the sins and failings of others than to gently love them in Jesus’ name. *2 Timothy 2:25*, tells us we’re to be “correcting opponents with **gentleness**. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth.” Sinners felt safe in the presence of Jesus, who is much holier than any of us, because the message they clearly got from him was a message of gentle love and acceptance that encouraged and enabled 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 anymore. 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 considerately toward other people. Now we no longer identify people as “ladies and gentlemen,” terms that were supposed to have at least a little to do with one's behavior and conduct.

But gentleness is a fruit of the spirit, a Christian virtue, we're to 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 riverbed, 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 begin 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. Gentle kindness and consistent love had won, and a lifelong friendship of trust and loyalty began.

In our relationships, whether parents with children, between spouses, friends, or even animals, gentleness is a greatly desired and highly effective quality. It's like oil lubricating an engine. A mechanic will tell you changing the oil in your vehicle at the regularly recommended amount of mileage or time 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 asks, “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.” It is sad how many leaders and prominent people are so obviously lacking in this gentleness and wisdom.

The parents of a young son wanted to teach him responsibility, so they required him to phone home when he arrived 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. The son 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 experience consequences. 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?

When Paul tells us to let our gentleness be known to everyone, he’s 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 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, and I felt loved. When you thought I wasn’t looking, I saw tears come from your eyes, and I learned that sometimes things hurt, and 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.” 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 great to experience gentleness from others when we’ve 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.”

There have been books written about the church being the only army that shoots its wounded. Church is the last place many people will turn when they’ve seriously messed up their lives because they feel badly enough already, and they think all they’ll get from Christians or a church is more condemnation. But who doesn’t make mistakes? 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, arrogance or judgment. Evelyn Underhill wrote in *The Spiritual Life*, "All our action must be peaceful, **gentle**, and 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." The stronger you become, the gentler you will be. Harshness, belittling, name calling, and bullying are signs of weakness and immaturity, not strength and maturity. Gentleness is strength that is harnessed, channeled and controlled to produce the good God wants in your life. 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 phrases. *Proverbs 15:4* urges us to remember, "A **gentle** tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit." 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, and 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 and accidentally spilled some hot ash which burned a hole right in the center of the window seat cover. Seeing what had happened, Helen calmly threaded a needle and 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, and my spirits began to soar. I had married a repairer of broken spirits, a healer of wounds, a woman whose gentle presence was an antidote to fear. 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 and a harbinger of hope in times of darkness and despair.

If we need some motivation to work on being gentler in our communication and responses to people, some words of Jesus about what is revealed in how we speak and communicate are worth pondering: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." *Matthew 12:34-37*

So be gentle with one another.

Blessing: *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.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What do you think of or envision when you hear the word gentleness? Is it a positive or negative word for you—why?
2. Recall a time when someone else’s gentleness was a blessing to you. What happened and what difference did it make?
3. Would people who know you well say that they see gentleness in you? How do you feel about what their response might be?
4. *James 3:13, 17* states, “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.” How is your life reflecting that “your works are done with **gentleness** born of wisdom?”
5. *Proverbs 15:4* urges us to remember, “A **gentle** tongue is a tree of life, but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.” What does this verse and many others referenced in the sermon tell us about the importance of any person’s speech and the words we use (see especially *Matthew 12:36-37*)?
6. What can you do as Paul states in *Philippians 4:5* to “Let your **gentleness** be known to everyone?”