

The Fruit of the Spirit - Gentleness

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I said when we were reading, we are going to continue our study today on the fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5 verse 22 and 23, but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things, there is no law. And today, as I said, we are focusing on the second last in Paul's list, we are looking at gentleness. And as we've said all the way through this study, the fruit of the Spirit is to be both the effect and the evidence of having God dwelling in our hearts by His Spirit. God's Spirit in us changes us, shapes us and has an influence on us and that change, that effect is visible to others. It's the evidence of the fact that we are Christians. And so that means that as Christians, we should always be characterised by gentleness. Now gentleness is a wonderful topic to look at and it has many, many things to teach us. Now what do we mean when we talk about gentleness? I suppose that's the first question to ask. Well gentleness is a mild, considerate and courteous disposition. It's a general friendliness towards other people and it's also an attitude that accommodates weaknesses in others. When we look at one another, we can very easily find fault and find weaknesses. Sometimes we can exploit these and criticise these, but gentleness makes allowance for these weaknesses. It's accommodating, it's courteous, it's kind. And I suppose in many ways the best way to understand it is that gentleness is really the opposite of being harsh. And that's one of the key ways that we show love to one another. Love is shown through a spirit of gentleness. And I think every one of us would agree that gentleness is a quality that we would want in ourselves and that we admire in one another. Today I want us just to look at two main headings. We're going to shortly look at how gentleness should be found in ourselves. But first of all I want us just to think about God's gentleness.

Because as with all the other elements of the fruit of the spirit, this word gentleness is first and foremost teaching us something about God. And so whilst we highlight almost every week the fact that God that has many remarkable attributes and we talk about his strength, his power, his majesty, all of these glorious attributes, we are also being reminded of a very, very precious truth. We've been reminded that God is gentle. God holds the universe, the mountains, the oceans in the palm of his hand. He has all of that strength.

And yet he's also so gentle. And there's lots of examples in that in the Bible. You can think of Samuel. Remember as a young boy, Samuel just a wee boy lying in bed and God called him and spoke to him in 1 Samuel chapter 3. You think of Elijah, 1 Kings 19, Elijah there, he was at the lowest of the low. And we have that remarkable account where he has a wind, he sees a wind, there's an earthquake, there's a fire. But God is not in any of these.

Instead, God is in a still small voice. He's in a low and gentle whisper. And so you can see lots of examples of God's gentleness. But the greatest and clearest demonstration of the gentleness of God is in God, the Son himself, Jesus Christ. And you read the Gospels, you will see perfect gentleness in Jesus. And there are so many occasions when Jesus proved this. That's why we read about the sinful woman. You had this woman whose life was a mess. And yet Jesus was so gentle with her. He said to her, your sins are forgiven.

People who were at the table said, who's this? He even forgives sins. He said to the woman, your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Just imagine what those words must have meant to that woman. Other examples, Aleppo. Now Aleppo were absolute outcasts. People did not want to go near Aleppo. Jesus went throughout all Galilee preaching in their synagogues, casting out demons. And Aleppo came up to him imploring him and kneeling said to him, if you will, you can make me clean. Now most people would have run a mile from Aleppo. And yet it says, moved with pity. He stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, I will be clean. Extraordinary gentleness from Jesus. And another example is with Peter. Remember, Peter denied Jesus. He failed massively. And yet this is what happened afterwards. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? He said to him, yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, feed my lambs. He said to him a second time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? He said to him, yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, tend my sheep. He said to him the third time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, do you love me? And he said to him, Lord, you know everything.

[5 : 52] You know that I love you. Jesus said to him, feed my sheep. And so in these three examples, Jesus meets a social outcast, a notorious sinner, and a Christian who has denied his Savior and failed drastically. And with each one of them, Jesus is gentle. And that's incredibly moving. And it's a reminder of the precious truth that Sam 100 and three tells us, the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding instead fast love.

He will not always child, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. And Jesus makes it absolutely clear that he is gentle. We read at the very beginning of the service, the wonderful words of Matthew 11 28, 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. Now that little word for in the middle, right in the middle, verse 29 is in a really important word, because it can also be translated because. So Jesus has basically said, come to me because I am gentle. And it's so, so important that we all grasp that because we can so often be held back from God, and we can keep away from God, because we are scared about how he might react. And that can be true of us even as Christians, and especially when it comes to confession of sin. Because the confession of sin is an important part of our Christian walk, we should be confessing our sins to God. In fact, we should even be confessing our sins to one another, as James says, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another. But sometimes we can be very, very reluctant to do that. When was the last time you confessed your sins to somebody else?

When was the last time you confessed your sins to God? Sometimes we can be reluctant because we're afraid that God will be angry, or that he'll be disappointed or frustrated with us. But Jesus is reminding us here of something that's so important. God will be gentle with everyone who comes to him. And that's why confession of sin is such a healthy and beneficial thing to do, because we're simply acknowledging to God what he already knows. We are showing him that we're sorry, and we are expressing to him that we need his help. Now that doesn't mean that God doesn't take sin seriously. It's the very fact that sin is so serious that we should run to God for help when we recognize sin in our lives.

By staying away from God, that we make the situation worse. God knows that, and that's why he says, come to me. And if you may not get a Christian or not sure, we can have the same problem. We can be held back from God because we think, well, what will God think of me? How will God be towards me? Well, how will God treat you if you come to him today?

[9 : 17] How will God treat you if you bow and pray to him right now? Will he be disappointed? Will he be reluctant? Will he be critical? No. He will be gentle. And that's the glorious truth of the gospel. There's a gentle God who is calling you towards him today. And the vital thing that we have to remember is that if you push God away, it's not God's heart that's too hard. It's ours. And the key point that all of this is reminding us of is that the answer to so many of life's traumas is to go to God. Because we will always face difficulties, we will always face challenges. We should go to God. If you get frustrated with somebody at work, go to God and ask him to give you patience. If you're confronted by difficult circumstances, go to God and ask him to use that experience for your sanctification.

If you are feeling stressed and under pressure with deadlines or emails or whatever it is that may be that burdening you, go to God and ask for peace, ask for strength, ask for wisdom. And it's all reminding us that God should be hearing from us a lot during the week. God should be hearing from you a lot during the week. And he will always, always gently listen. And he'll always do what's best. And so that's the great truth that we've been reminded first of all, that God is gentle. God the Father is patient and long suffering. God the Spirit is the Comforter who will help us. And God the Son is the greatest model of gentleness that the world has ever seen. God is gentle. And of course, the emphasis of the fruit of the Spirit is not simply that this is an attribute of God. It's reminding us that this gentleness is something that should be clearly seen in us. Christians should and must be gentle. But how is it that we do that? Well, in general terms, the New Testament makes it clear that our daily walk, what we do from day to day or habits or lifestyle or conduct must be characterized by gentleness. Ephesians 4 chapter, Ephesians 4 verse 1 tells us that therefore, I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you've been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. Now that's really interesting. Look at what that says. It says, walk in a worthy manner. How do you do that? With humility and gentleness. So somebody who is worthy of God's calling is somebody who is humble and gentle. And that manifests itself in so many different ways. It means bearing with one another, accommodating for one another's weaknesses and always striving to maintain unity and peace. Now, at the Premisean recently we were talking about this in regard to the Sermon on the Mount and we said that perhaps the simplest and easiest way to understand gentleness is to say that Christians should be thoroughly nice people. Now that probably sounds so simple and maybe even superficial, but it's not. It's something that we need to take incredibly seriously. Every single person who has a contact with us as Christians should go away from saying that person was really nice. Every person who comes into this church today should go away thinking those people were really nice. And the reason this is so important is because a failure to be gentle, a failure to be nice is incredibly damaging. If a Christian is not nice at work or at the community or at home, it does a huge amount of damage. And Paul highlights that in Galatians 5. He says, if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you're not consumed by one another. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envy in one another. Paul is saying that kind of behaviour should never characterise us. So at one level, this is a warning. If failing to be nice is damaging to the work of the Gospel, it's a warning because we are only ever one step away, one step away from not being nice. And we get tested every day in terms of circumstances about being nice and gentle to the people

that we meet. Therefore, we need to pray that God would keep us and that God would help us. So it's a warning at one level. But at another level, I want this to encourage you because it is a reminder that every single day you can do something wonderful for the kingdom of God. Now, sometimes we think that being wonderful, doing something wonderful for the kingdom of God means achieving something great, doing some massive work, having some massive responsibility. But we have been reminded here that the wonderful thing that you and I can do every day is that we can be gentle to everyone that we meet. And so gentleness should be a characteristic of every part of our lives. That's a great challenge, but it's something that we can all achieve and it can do great things for the kingdom of God. So that's kind of a general statement about our gentleness. But I want us to look at this a bit more closely because if you do a word study of the word gentleness in the New Testament, which is in other words, a word study is when you look at all the different places where this word appears, then you discover something very, very interesting. You look at where the word gentleness appears in the New Testament, you will discover that the

New Testament makes a very clear link between gentleness and another topic. Okay? Gentleness is linked with a really, really important topic. I'd love to ask you to guess what it is, but I won't. The New Testament links gentleness and controversy. It's really interesting.

And we'll look at four examples of this where gentleness is linked to controversy. There's actually an example of this, just a few verses after Paul's words in Galatians 5, the very start of chapter 6 we read. Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself lest you too be tempted. So here Paul is linking gentleness and church discipline. Now discipline is an essential mark of the church. The church has a responsibility to nurture, to direct, and when necessary to correct its members. The Christian church is never a do whatever you like society. There are certain things that we expect. And being a church member means that you are under the discipline of the elders. They are your overseers, they are your shepherds.

[17 : 25] But when we hear the word discipline, we tend to always think of something bad and something harsh. We think somebody's done something drastic, they're being disciplined. And we always have these negative connotations. But the reality is that proper discipline is a beautiful thing. Because discipline lies at the heart of any family, doesn't it? When you have children, you don't let them do whatever. You guide them, you correct them, and you do that because you care about them. And if somebody wanders off in a church, you just desperately want to bring them back and to restore them. And so church discipline is essential for that. And Paul is reminding us that that discipline should always be done gently. And that's because the great goal of church discipline is to restore the individual, to gently restore the individual, so that they are no longer falling into sin. But they are once again able to serve God in his church. So church discipline and gentleness go hand in hand. Another example is in 2 Timothy, and we'll read these verses. 2 Timothy 2, 24 to 26. 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. Here Paul is linking gentleness with correcting opponents. So if someone is wrong, if someone opposes us as a church, what do we do with them? We are to aim to correct them with gentleness. Now that's really interesting. And it raises relevant questions for us. How are we to be towards the people who want to open the sports centre on Sundays? How should we act towards them? How should we act towards the people who want to remove religious education from schools? How should we deal with people who have a different definition of marriage to what we have and to what the

Bible has? How should we deal with all of these people? We should be gentle. Now that doesn't mean that we compromise and we are always, always faithful to God's standards, but being uncompromising does not mean being harsh. And the truth is, if we are aggressive and harsh towards our opponents, then it's we who are compromising our standards because we're simply being worldly. That's how the world acts. We are to be gentle with our opponents.

And Paul is highlighting the fact that that gentleness is actually an amazing witness because look what is his goal in these verses he says. Our great desire is that our opponents would come to their senses and put their trust in Jesus. Who knows? God may grant them repentance.

Paul is saying your gentleness is a way of reaching these people. And that's so important because it's so easy to draw lines, isn't it? We meet people and they oppose something that we believe in. So they want the Sports Centre open on Sunday or they want to see Christians removed from the Education Committee or something like that. It's so easy to draw lines and to think these people are our enemies. And yet the best thing that we can do is treat them with gentleness. Not compromising our beliefs, but showing a gentleness that will make them listen. And so Paul links gentleness with correcting opponents. A third example is in Titus. Titus 3, 1-2. Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarrelling, to be gentle and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. Here Paul is linking gentleness with quarrelling. So there's another question. If we face a quarrel, how should we react?

What should our attitude be? Well, we should be gentle. And again, this is very interesting and it's very, very challenging because Paul is saying that if someone provokes us, if somebody really gets to us, we are to respond with gentleness. Now that is not easy, is it? If someone bites you, it's so tempting to bite back. And yet Paul is saying, no, we respond with gentleness. And it's immensely important because if we are faced with a quarrel, what is our goal? Our goal is that the quarrel would come to an end. We don't want to put fuel on the fire, we want to put water on the fire. As Christians, we should always be peacemakers, as Jesus tells us so clearly in Matthew chapter 5. We should always be looking to reconcile. That's why Paul urgently urged people to make up when they fell out. If Philippians 4.1 is an example of that, therefore my brothers, my love and long for my joy and crown stand for him thus in the Lord, my beloved. I entreat Yodia and I entreat Sintihe to agree in the

[23 : 39] Lord. Yes, I ask you also through companions, help these women. Paul is not taking sides. Paul is not criticizing. He is simply gently urging these two women who have fallen out to be reconciled, to agree in the Lord. So the Christian response to a quarrel is not to retaliate. It's not to push people at arm's length. It's not to draw a line and say, I'm never going to talk to that person again. It's not to say, well, I will forgive, but I won't forget, or I will maintain a difference, or will I wait for this person to respond first. They started it. They need to finish it. None of that is biblical. The Christian response to a quarrel is gentleness. So if you face a quarrel this week, you know what to do, and so do I. The fourth example is from Peter. It's not just Paul who makes this connection. Peter does as well. But even if you should suffer for righteousness sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them nor be troubled. But in your hearts, on our

Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and respect. Here, Peter is making a link between gentleness and apologetics. Now, apologetics is basically what we mean by the defence of the Christian faith. If people oppose us, if people question us, we make a defence. We respond to it. And you see people like David Robertson who are very actively engaged in Christian apologetics, defending the faith from opposition. And so as Christians, we need to be ready to give an answer for what we believe. So if someone says, why do you believe that there's a God? We can answer that by saying that we can clearly see evidence of order and design in the world around us. Nothing in our experience or in the history of science has ever demonstrated that such order and such reality can come about simply by chance. We don't see that kind of thing happening. But we do see order and design in every part of life. And the universe reflects that very same principle.

If someone says, how do you know the Bible's true? How do you know the Bible's true? We can answer that and we can say it's the most historically attested document of the classical period. It's been repeatedly verified by archaeological evidence and the contents of the Bible itself are so relevant, so unique, so perfect in style and in majesty and coherence that it abundantly evidences itself to be the word of God. Someone else might ask, are not all religions the same? We respond and we say, we give an answer, we say the claims of Jesus Christ are unique. And even though his message is inclusive and that everyone's invited and called to the Gospel, it is at the same time an exclusive message because he alone is the savior of sinners. No one comes to the Father but by Jesus. We believe in him because we want the truth and we believe that truth requires an element of exclusivity.

And so we can't hold the view that all religions are the same. So there's lots of questions like this and we can maybe look at them in more detail sometime in the future. Paul is reminding us though that whenever we deal with a questioner, a skeptic or even an opponent of the Christian faith, we are to speak with gentleness. That means it's never right for a Christian to insult an atheist. Never right to do that. We should always act with gentleness and respect. And these four examples are showing us that the New Testament makes a very clear link between gentleness and controversy. If it's opposition or quarrels or questions or discipline, all of these things should be dealt with gently. But why is that? Why does the New Testament link gentleness with controversy? Well I think the reason for that is because gentleness is incredibly powerful. Now that's a vital truth for us to grasp.

We need to recognize the power of gentleness. Now to many people that might seem as a contradiction because people will think well surely gentleness is a sign of weakness. You're a bit soft, you're a bit mild. But in reality gentleness is incredibly powerful. The reason for that is quite simple. If you have a quarrel between two people or if you have sin in the life of a believer or if you have an opponent or somebody challenging you, if you are faced in a difficult situation, if you respond to something like that by being harsh, you're only going to make the situation worse. But if you are gentle, you can turn reconciliation, you can turn confrontation into reconciliation. You can turn a fall into sin into a sanctifying experience. You can turn an opponent into a brother. And you can't do any of those things by being harsh or cold or arrogant. But you can if you are gentle. It's because gentleness is powerful. Romans 12 highlights that. Repay no one evil for evil. So if someone's harsh to you, don't be harsh back. But give thought to what is honorable in the sight of all.

[30 : 02] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God for it is written vengeance is mine. I will repay says the Lord. To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him something to drink for by doing so you'll heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Paul is highlighting the power and priority of gentleness. And we can prove that this is true. This principle that gentleness is powerful. I think we can prove it's true because let me ask you, think of the people that you respect most in your life. Think of the people that you have met or that you know that you respect most. Now are they harsh people? Or are they gentle people? God knows that gentleness is powerful. Therefore, when it comes to controversy, when it comes to the most difficult situations in life, God is saying to us, be gentle. Always be gentle.

Now, when we are saying this, we must remember that doctrinal accuracy is not an excuse for a lack of gentleness. That's really, really important to remember. We might have our theology right, but that's not an excuse to lack gentleness. We can be orthodox in what we say and yet sinful in the way that we say it. So we must be careful. But neither is gentleness an excuse for pure theology. When I'm saying gentleness, I'm not saying, oh, it doesn't really matter what we believe. I am not saying that at all. And gentleness does not mean being spineless.

It does not mean compromising on our theology because it means really the very opposite. Because a gentle Christian is a Christian who really knows his theology. Because theology teaches us that we ourselves are recipients of grace from a gentle God. Theology teaches us that vengeance and judgment is ultimately God's prerogative, not ours. Theology teaches us that the church is a family where we nurture and guide and discipline each other because we love each other and because we want to help each other. Theology teaches us that hostility and conflict and quarrelling is worldliness and therefore it's damaging to the distinctive witness of Christ's church. And theology teaches us that Jesus is gentle and we never ever ever have an excuse to be anything other than Christlike. So the truth is gentleness is found in the strongest because Jesus Christ was the gentlest person who has ever walked on this earth and yet nobody, nobody has had anything like the influence that he has. Gentleness is powerful and so God grant that we would be gentle. Let's pray.

God our Father we thank you that you are gentle, gentle with frail weeks in earth like us.

And we pray that we too would be gentle and that even when we face controversy, whether it's opposition or failure in one of our brothers or sisters or opposition or questions from skeptics help us always to maintain that gentleness that is powerful. Give us wisdom in these things O Lord and may your word shape our hearts, write your word on our hearts Lord to make us what you want us to be in Jesus name. Amen.