

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Gentleness, *Galatians 5:22-23*

"You've got to ask yourself one question: 'Do I feel lucky?' Well, do you, punk?" Clint Eastwood's character "Dirty Harry" voiced that now-popular phrase in the 1971 movie by the same name. The movie follows Eastwood's character, a police officer in San Francisco, as he tracks down a psychopathic serial killer named "Scorpio". Even though Eastwood's character behaves in ways like the movie's villain, the film casts his willingness to bend and break the rules and to use violence to stop Scorpio as misunderstood, but necessary, heroic behavior. *Dirty Harry* represents a common motif in American cinema – heroes do whatever it takes to stop the bad guy – that stands in stark contrast to the gentleness Paul said ought to characterize Christians. This lesson will consider "gentleness" in Paul's "fruit of the Spirit"¹ list and its place in our lives.

"The meekness and gentleness of Christ"²

- All major English translations of the Bible use "gentleness" to translate the Greek word (*prautes*) Paul used in Galatians 5:23. Paul also used the same word in Titus 3:2, but English Bibles translate the word in a variety of ways:
 - "Consideration" - New American Standard Bible.
 - "Courtesy" – English Standard Version.
 - "Gentle" – New International Version.
 - "Humility" – New King James Version.
- The range of words used in Titus 3:2 helps us understand the broader meaning of *prautes* – it speaks about the ability to deal with problems, hostility, and criticism without resorting to aggression, bluster, or self-defense.
- While the Greek and Roman world Paul inhabited would have joined him in labeling "gentleness" as a virtue (*cf. Galatians 5:22-23*), a significant difference existed between their applications of gentleness.
 - Paul argued that "gentleness" should be shown to all people, including opponents (2 *Timothy 2:25; Titus 3:2*).
 - Greek and Roman thinkers believed people, especially leaders, should practice gentleness but that it needed a counterbalance (i.e., anger, harshness, brutality) to avoid being a flaw. Greek statesman Demosthenes, for example, illustrates the typical attitude towards "gentleness" in a speech directed at conflicts among Athenian politicians. Demosthenes said:

"For it ought to have been the reverse, men of Athens; all your politicians should have trained you to be gentle and humane in the Assembly, for there you are

¹ Galatians 5:22-23. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

² 2 Corinthians 10:1.



*dealing with rights that concern yourselves and your allies, but in preparing for war they should have made you threatening and intractable, because there you are pitted against your enemies and rivals*³.

- While the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) alludes to the gentleness of God (cf. *Psalm 23:2-3; Isaiah 40:11; Psalm 103:13-14*), His gentleness finds pointed and unexpected expression in the New Testament's story of Jesus.
 - Matthew repeatedly pointed out that Jesus came as a conquering king who asserted his rule through gentleness rather than violence (*Matthew 11:29; 21:5*).
 - Jesus expected his gentleness to characterize those who claim citizenship in his kingdom. For example:
 - Jesus stated that the gentle/meek, rather than the militant, possess his kingdom (*Matthew 5:5*).
 - Jesus repeatedly focused his gentleness on those who humbled themselves before him while he censured those who failed to practice gentleness (cf. *John 4:1-42; Matthew 23:1-36*).
 - Paul's behavior toward the Corinthians illustrates what it looks like when Jesus' gentleness takes root in a person's life (*2 Corinthians 10:1-6*).

Applications

- Because we claim citizenship in Jesus' kingdom, the gentleness that defines him ought to define our lives too. That gentleness expresses itself through such things as:
 - Peaceable, reasonable, merciful actions that reveal our submission to God's wisdom (*James 3:13-18*).
 - A "defense" of our faith that treats people with respect and dignity (*1 Peter 3:15*)
 - Acting with patience, grace, and goodness towards people when they create challenges for us (*Titus 3:2*), especially when those people are our "opponents" (*2 Timothy 2:25*)
 - Compassionate and patient behavior in dealing with others that seeks to preserve our relationships with them (*Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:12*).
- We need to engrain gentleness in our lives because, like Paul's world, we tend to only value gentleness in our close relationships while we justify indifference, even harshness, in all other relationships.

Paul wrote that gentleness defines those in whom the Holy Spirit operates. We should consequently ask ourselves, "Am I a gentle person? Do my actions reveal the Holy Spirit's presence in my life?"

³ Demosthenes. (1930). [*Demosthenes with an English translation by J. H. Vince, M.A.*](#) Medford, MA: Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd.



"I AM GENTLE"

Jesus, gentleness, and us, *Matthew 11:28-30*

Matthew's gospel narrates Jesus' identity as God's promised messianic king (*cf. Matthew 2:1-6*). Even though he asserted Jesus' identity as the conquering king who established God's kingdom in the world, Matthew wrote that Jesus founded his rule through humility and gentleness rather than violence.

Near the end of his gospel, for example, Matthew describes Jesus entering Jerusalem at the head of a procession of people who accompanied him on his journey to the city (*Matthew 21:1-11*). The crowds following Jesus merged with crowds from Jerusalem to greet him as he entered the city, hailing him as God's promised Davidic king (*Matthew 21:9*). Matthew intentionally narrates Jesus' entrance into the Jewish capital city as the triumphal procession of a conquering king, but he portrayed it in a way that turned expectations upside down – Jesus' entrance stressed his gentleness and peacefulness rather than his military prowess (*Matthew 21:1-5*).

Matthew moves his gospel to its climax by following Jesus past the city gates into Jerusalem where, a week later, he would be condemned to death by the crowds that greeted him when he entered the city. Matthew, however, recounts Jesus' death in a way that reveals it to be the means of his coronation and exaltation as God's promised king (*Matthew 27:1-54; cf. vv. 11, 29, 37, 42, 54*).

Matthew prepared his readers for Jesus' unusual path to power. He, for example, included several passages that emphasized Jesus' gentle character. Consider:

- Matthew 5:5 – Jesus tied meekness/gentleness to citizenship in his kingdom.
- Matthew 11:28-30 – Jesus announced his "gentle and lowly" identity; he models the gentleness he said defined citizens in his kingdom.
- Matthew 12:1-8 – Jesus revealed his gentleness by elevating mercy over sacrifice, by foregrounding individual's needs over the demands of religious ritual.
- Matthew 12:9-14 – Jesus' provocative healing of a lame man further emphasized the importance of people and their needs over even the demands of God's law.

While Jesus' gentleness motivated him to accommodate people with compassion and patience, his gentleness did not disregard judgment.

- Matthew 10:34-39 – Jesus announced that his identity and expectations would divide people, and those who refused to join him would lose their lives.
- Matthew 11:20-24 – Jesus announced severe judgment on Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum for their rejection of him.
- Matthew 23:1-36 – Jesus condemned the hardheartedness of the scribes and Pharisees



So, given Jesus' gentle identity and the Holy Spirit's effort to cultivate gentleness in us (*Galatians 5:22-23*), consider the following questions:

How does our culture regard gentleness? How might its estimation of gentleness influence our thinking?

What features define Jesus' gentleness? How do you think those features should influence our gentleness?

What, if any, limits does Jesus' gentleness have? How might those limits offer a boundary for our gentleness?

What actual, practical, everyday things do you think we can do to be more gentle people?

