



The Fruit of the Spirit - Gentleness — Meekness

By: Stanley M. Horton

Number eight in the list of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23) is meekness or gentleness. What is the quality of meekness or gentleness? Certainly in the biblical sense it is not weakness, nor is it self-debasing or a belittling of oneself.¹

There are two stories about George Washington that have impressed me as illustrations of at least one aspect of biblical meekness or gentleness. The stories may be apocryphal, but they picture him as not only a gentleman but also a gentle man. On one occasion, he was fox hunting with a group of friends. One of the fields through which they were passing was bordered by a stone wall. As his horse jumped the wall it knocked off a stone. Washington immediately stopped, got down from his horse, and replaced the stone. One of his friends said, “You are too big a man to bother with that.” He replied gently, “No, I am just the right size.”

Another story tells of a corporal at Valley Forge who was directing three men as they tried to lift a log into place. It was too heavy, but the corporal commanded again and again, “All right, men, one, two, three, lift!” A man in an overcoat came by and said to the corporal, “Why don’t you help them?” The corporal pulled himself up to full height and replied, “Sir, I am a corporal.” Without a word the man stepped over and with his help the log went easily into place. The man was George Washington.

Gentleness includes true humility that does not consider itself too good or too exalted for humble tasks.

Myer Pearlman, quoting Donald Gee, gave another illustration I like. A guide was taking a group of visitors through a factory. One of the things he showed them was a giant steam hammer capable of flattening an automobile. Then the guide put down a walnut and had the hammer break the shell without hurting the meat of the nut. What an illustration of gentleness as power under perfect control!² That gets close to the biblical meaning.

The King James Version lists gentleness as the fifth fruit of the Spirit. In today’s English the meaning is better expressed by the word “kindness.” The eighth fruit that we are dealing with in this article is translated “meekness” in the King James Version. However, it is translated “gentleness” in most of the newer English versions. This is not a matter of any difference in the ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. The Greek word *prautesis* found in them all. The problem here is that the English language has changed since the days of King James and Shakespeare. The common dictionary definition of meekness as it is used today is “deficient in spirit and courage.” That is a far cry from the meaning of the Greek word.

Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary does give an older meaning for meekness as “enduring injury with patience and without resentment.” That might not be too far from the meaning of the biblical word, but the Greek is much more positive. The French versions are closer when they use *douceur*, which has the meaning of sweetness, mildness, gentleness, and good nature. Gentleness is never self-important but is considerate, courteous, and modest, yet willing to try when a job needs to be done. In The Full Life Study Bible it is defined as restraint coupled with strength and courage.³

Aristotle gave its classic definition as halfway between excessive anger and indifference.⁴ That is, he felt the gentle

person could be angry at the right time and submissive at the right time. The classical Greek also used it of animals that were powerful, yet tamed and under control. My Greek lexicon includes the meanings of humility, courtesy, and considerateness.⁵ The Interpreter's Bible says it is the opposite of hubris, the Greek word for haughty, boastful insolence.⁶

To try to understand gentleness further, let us go through the passages in the Bible where the Greek word *prautes* is used. In the Old Testament the Septuagint uses it once in Psalm 45:4. The Psalmist calls on God, "Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most Mighty, with thy glory and thy majesty. And in thy majesty ride prosperously, because of truth and gentleness and righteousness" (Psalm 45:3,4). Obviously, gentleness is not weakness. It is not allowing yourself to become a doormat. It is part of God's character as He moves triumphantly in mighty power and victory.

In 1 Corinthians 4:21, Paul is dealing with arrogant people and says, "What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit." Paul had a tremendous love for the believers in all the churches, but his love was not mere blind sentimentality. He knew they sometimes needed discipline, and he "was prepared to exercise it."⁷ But he wanted to see them respond in repentance so he could show them the love and gentleness that was in his heart toward them.

In 2 Corinthians 10:1, Paul appeals to them by the meekness (gentleness, Greek, *prautes*) and gentleness (sweet reasonableness, Greek, *epieikeias*) of Christ. Then he goes on to talk about the weapons we fight with that are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to tear down strongholds. We are not carried away by rage, personal vindictiveness, greed, or pride as we seek victories for Christ. But with the gentleness of Christ we can triumph powerfully.

In Galatians 6:1, Paul tells us that if a man is trapped in some sin, those who are spiritual should restore him gently. Problems arise where even the best of us may slip up, just as one might slip on an icy or dangerous path. If we are truly filled with the Spirit we will show gentleness, not hardness, not condemnation, as we try to restore such a person.

In Ephesians 4:2, where Paul is urging us to live a life worthy of the calling we have received, he calls on us to be "completely humble and gentle."⁸ We are to be free from self-exaltation and fully submitted to the will of God both in our relation to Him and in our relationships with others.

In Colossians 3:12, Paul urges us "as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved," to clothe ourselves "with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." This shows that the fruit of the Spirit needs our cooperation for its development.

Some have said, "Don't worry about the fruit. Just bask in the sunlight of His love, enjoy the rain of His blessing, and the fruit will automatically appear." But it does not work that way. We have to put to death the works of the flesh. We have to take to ourselves the fruit of the Spirit and exercise our faith to develop them (Compare 2 Peter 1:5-11).

In 2 Timothy 2:25, Paul tells the Lord's servant that those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will give them a change of heart, leading them to the knowledge of the truth. That is, he must keep on patiently and gently teaching. William Barclay compares him to a surgeon who goes directly to the diseased spot, yet without causing any unnecessary pain.⁹

In Titus 3:2, Paul instructs Titus to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable (that is, not quarrelsome), to be considerate, and to show true humble gentleness toward everyone. It includes the idea of springing to the help of those in need, yet keeping our own feelings under control.¹⁰

James 1:21 commands us to get rid of all filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and with a humble gentleness accept the word planted in us, which can save us.

James 3:13 asks, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility [Greek, *prautes*, 'humble gentleness'] that comes from wisdom."

Finally, in 1 Peter 3:15,16, we are told to be prepared to answer everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope we have. But we are to do this “with gentleness and respect.”

Someone has pointed out that courage is not in Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit. But we should recognize that it takes courage to be gentle in the midst of all the evil surrounding us in this world. It took courage for Paul to stand against the party spirit that had developed in Corinth and that had become almost vicious.

Gentleness is never a false modesty, a self-depreciation, or a spineless refusal to stand for anything. Gentleness is never a cowardly retreat from reality, which substitutes a passive selfishness for real gentleness and avoids trouble in ways that allow even greater trouble to develop. Neither is it a false humility that refuses to recognize God has given us talents and abilities or that refuses to use them for His glory.

The Bible says Moses excelled in the meekness that is gentleness (Numbers 12:3). God gave him a high position. It is hard for the natural man to be gentle toward those who attack him, especially if they attack his official rank and honor. But Moses did not try to defend himself. He was gentle toward Miriam and Aaron and let God take care of the situation. Gentleness includes the idea that we do not care about what happens to our honor as much as what happens to God’s honor and what happens to others.

In our daily lives we cannot help coming into situations that bring conflicts with people. It is easy for us in the natural to react with violence or anger, especially if we feel insecure in our position. But when we accept the reality of who we are in Christ and trust the Holy Spirit to help us, we can be gentle, whatever conflicts may arise.

Jesus showed true gentleness both in the midst of conflict and in the midst of popularity. His healings and miracles often brought the crowds to a high pitch of enthusiasm. But He refused to let them make Him the kind of king they wanted. He reminded them of the passage in Isaiah 42:1–4, “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.”

Jesus knew who He was, but He was gentle and humble — quite a contrast to the lying teachers who today exalt themselves by noisy demonstrations and who too often begin to think of themselves as above the requirements of holiness and justice.

Jesus’ awareness of His power enabled Him to be gentle to those in need. The broken reed He would not crush but would fully restore. The flickering wick of a lamp He would not put out but would cause it to burn brightly again. His gentleness works. It brings forth righteousness, and it will bring forth justice in the earth, He gently takes the sinner and makes him whole.

“Thank you, Lord, for saving my soul. Thank you, Lord, for making me whole.” Thank you, Lord, also that you saved me for a purpose. Thank you, Lord, for the experiences that teach us how to fulfill your purpose with humble gentleness.

May we cultivate that fruit of the Spirit which gives all the glory to God and shows a gentleness that is powerful and demonstrates the high, holy, faithful love of God!

Endnotes

1. Stanley M. Horton, *What the Bible Says About the Holy Spirit* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1976), 179.
2. Myer Pearlman, *How to Speak Effectively* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1949), 51.
3. The NIV Full Life Study Bible—New Testament, ed. Donald Stamps (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House,

1990), 395.

4. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2nd ed., 1958), 57.

5. Arndt Bauer, Danker Gingrich, *A Greek Lexicon to the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 699.

6. *The Interpreters Bible*, Raymond T. Stamm, "Galatians, Exegesis" (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1953, Vol. 10), 569.

7. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2nd ed., 1956), 47.

8. William Barclay, *Galatians, Ephesians*, 58.

9. William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 2nd ed., 1960), 208.

10. *Ibid.*, 297.

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