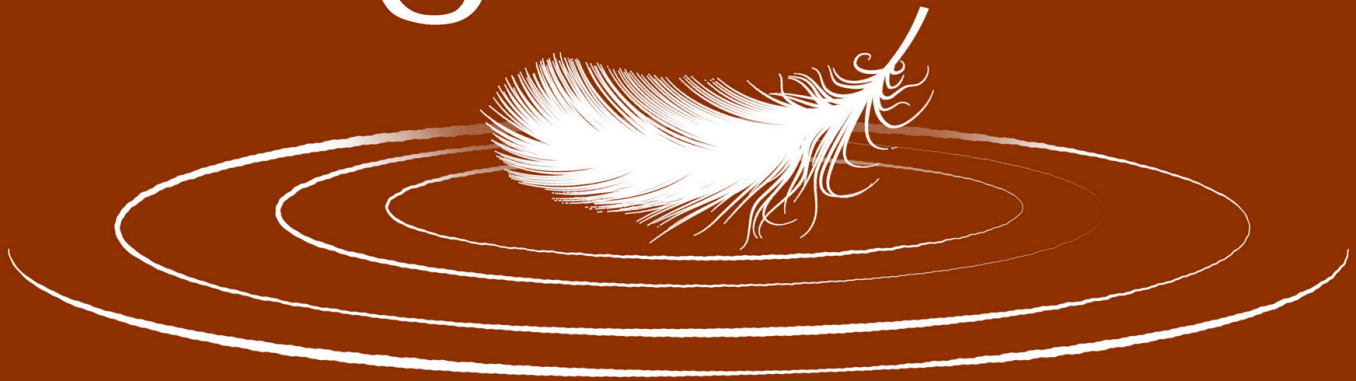


gentle



Of the nine fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5, gentleness is the one we most often overlook. To be gentle is to be kind and loving, full of grace. When we stand firm as Christians and defend the faith, we are taught to do it gently and with respect. Someone who truly attends to growing in gentleness will stand out in this world. Gentleness will reflect the light of Jesus.

GENTLE • GALATIANS 5:22–6:3 • Tim McConnell • November 4, 2018

I have a friend whose grandparents, when he was a kid, would not let him in the house until he recited the nine fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. I thought that was pretty funny. But as he told us the story, his eyes got wide and he said, "And they lived in Minnesota." So they would drive up there to visit at Christmas, get out of the car and stand in minus 22 degrees, teeth chattering, lips going numb, snot icicles forming, as they tried to remember the nine fruit of the Spirit! He knows them all! Maybe you should try something like that with your grandkids if you have some. I bet the one fruit of the Spirit you forget the most is "gentleness." You've heard of the forbidden fruit; well, this is the forgotten fruit. That's just how gentleness is; it sits back and lets the others get all the attention. "You don't need to talk about me. Just go on with all the love, joy, peace stuff. Talk about self-control, I don't need any attention." But I think gentleness deserves some attention. For us boys, we grew up being told to be gentlemen. A man of God is gentle. A woman rooted in faith knows gentleness. To be gentle is to be kind and loving, full of grace. When we stand firm as Christians and defend the faith, we are taught to do it gently and with respect. Someone who truly attends to growing in gentleness will stand out in this world. Gentleness will reflect the light of Jesus.

It doesn't take more than one lap around the track to see what kind of world we are living in. Just one loop around the news cycle and you know we are living in a punch-back-harder world. Poke me, I'll punch you; punch me, I'll kick you. Whoever hits harder wins. Are you sure that's what Jesus intends? It just doesn't sound like the fruit of the Spirit to me. I think God has a different way for us; a different kind of victory maybe. I thought we could all benefit from a few weeks on the fruit of the Spirit, and in particular, zeroing in on this forgotten fruit of gentleness. You know, when you let that punch-back-harder mentality take you, the thing is, sometimes you hit people you didn't mean to hit, sometimes you harm people who mean the most to you just because you've learned to swing first and think later. Paul wrote to the young church in Galatia telling them to watch out, "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Galatians 5:15). If all you do is use your fangs, you might hurt someone you are trying to love. It's like kissing Dracula (for a timely reference). There's a better way, but we are going to have to choose it and cultivate it because our flesh is going to want to go the other direction.

Paul's famous passage about the fruit of the Spirit is actually in the middle of a section outlining a stark contrast; a battle, waged within the hearts and minds

of believers; a battle between "flesh" and "spirit." It is set up clearly back in Galatians 5:16–17, "So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want" (Galatians 5:16–17). You don't just fly toward whatever you want. You think, then do. Why? Because there's a war going on, and what you feed will grow, what you choose will become who you are. Don't be surprised or dismayed when the battle rages, but be mindful and choose Jesus.

Martin Luther wrote about this battle in his commentary on Galatians: "No one should despair because the sinful nature often stirs up new battles against the Spirit or because the sinful nature cannot be subdued straightaway and made obedient to the Spirit." See, even in believers—more so in believers—this battle is waged. "Anyone who does not know this doctrine and thinks that the faithful ought to be faultless and yet sees the opposite in himself will eventually be overcome by depression and despair. But anyone who knows this doctrine well and uses it properly finds evil things turning out for good. When the sinful nature provokes such people to sin, they are stirred up and forced to seek forgiveness of sins in Christ and to embrace the righteousness of faith...Therefore, it is very good for us sometimes to feel the wickedness and corruption of our sinful nature, so that we may be awakened and stirred up to faith and call upon Christ. If you feel the desires of your sinful nature, do not despair of salvation. The more godly you are, the more you feel that battle" (Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*).

Sometimes we think as soon as we are rooted in Christ, the weeds stop growing, the wind stops blowing, the storms stop coming, the inner battle is over. No. But if we hold on to Christ in the battle, if we stay rooted in Christ in the wind, the fruit will come—and even sweeter because of it. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23 ESV). Fruit doesn't just happen instantly. It grows slowly. It is born on a vine. The ancient, Jerome, wrote, "Paul has spoken elegantly by allotting *works* to the flesh and *fruits* to the Spirit. Vices come to nothing and perish in themselves. Virtues multiply and abound in fruit." Works of the flesh happen quickly and produce nothing of lasting value. But the good things that come from abiding in Christ our vine, the fruit that emerges from hanging in with Him through the struggle, these are different. They are lasting. Fruit, think about this now, fruit is sweet. Fruit is attractive. Fruit is seed-bearing and reproducing. Fruit multiplies its own,

it is fecund, fertile, bountiful. Fruit is where life continues and abounds. Works of the flesh are dead ends. Are you rooted in the flesh or rooted in the Spirit to bear fruit?

What is fruit and how do you get it? See, kids, before “strawberry” became a flavor of the Laffy Taffy in the bottom of your Halloween bag, it was actually something else! Fruit isn’t just a flavor. Before we could just buy fruit, fresh or frozen, all year round, you know it had to grow out of the ground. I actually got interested this week and looked up some info on Rocky Ford cantaloupe, because they had a banner crop this year. One farm out there produces two million cantaloupe melons every year. In April, GPS-programmed autopilot planters get the seeds perfectly distributed across the soil one inch deep. Irrigation is applied by GPS systems under the seedbed so the vines never have to search for water. Weeds and bugs are controlled, air circulation and sun exposure carefully planned and measured and the leaves are guarded; the leaves produce the sugar. A normal cantaloupe can expect a brix level (that’s the sugar content) of thirteen or fourteen, but Rocky Ford cantaloupe this year hit sixteen. Sweetest in the world some say. No one knows for sure why, but the farmers tell you it’s the soil, and it’s the cold nights and warm days that makes them sweet. It’s the exposure to extremes. In a sense, it’s what the fruit endures that makes it sweet. But as anyone in agriculture knows, you can do everything you can think of to support the growth of fruit—but you don’t grow fruit. It grows, or doesn’t grow, by forces way outside of your control. The hardest pressures can produce the sweetest fruit. That’s fruit.

What is the fruit of the Spirit and how do we get it? Eugene Peterson wrote, “Fruit is the result of a long organic process. This process is complex and intricate. Fruit isn’t something made, manufactured or engineered. It isn’t the product of drawing boards or committee meetings or sophisticated technologies. It isn’t the invention of a genius. It’s the result of a life of faith that is both germinated and nurtured by God’s Spirit.” Jesus said, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5 ESV). We don’t make spiritual fruit any more than Rocky Ford makes cantaloupe, but if we set the context, cultivate the platform; if we abide in Christ we will find fruit. The Spirit grows fruit in us. In all of us. The Spirit gives gifts; you’ve heard maybe of spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are capabilities given to believers for the upbuilding of the church. These are particular capabilities. Fruit of the Spirit is different. These are not

capabilities but character traits. And they are for all of us, for every one of us to cultivate and bear. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. By the way, is cantaloupe a fruit or vegetable? It’s impossible to know.

This month we zero in on one fruit. Of all the nine fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, I suspect the one you have given the least thought is number eight, “gentleness.” But gentleness is a virtue. It is sweet and seed-bearing and attractive. Gentleness is a godly quality to be developed and cultivated as the fruit of the Spirit of God in us. Do you hope to be a gentler person? Do you wish you were gentler of spirit, gentler with those around you? Have you ever prayed for more gentleness? It’s a fruit of the Spirit, a universal Christian character trait we should all have on display and long to display more and more. I asked some of the staff what they thought of gentleness and it confirmed some my suspicions. As guys, I’m particularly talking to guys as a guy right now, as guys we are not so sure about this. It seems unmanly. I thought a man was someone who stood up to fight and won the battle. I don’t want to be weaker. I don’t want to be a doormat. I want to be stronger! But here’s the thing. Gentleness is not weakness. It’s strength.

“Gentle” and “humble” are in the same word family in the New Testament. To grow in gentleness is to grow in humility. Humility, it is said, is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less. It is putting others first. That actually requires great confidence, great strength. This was a radical idea in Paul’s day. Paul was a Roman citizen. Romans were famously addicted to pride, power and conquest. The four cardinal virtues of Rome were wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. As they got applied by Roman men and Roman military leaders and emperors, these were all just ways to beat your opponent. Wisdom: if I’m smarter than you I can beat you. Courage: if I have more fortitude and strength than you, I can beat you. Temperance: if I have more self-control and restraint than you, I won’t overextend my power and you will—and I can beat you. Justice: we’ll figure that out once I beat you! I’ll tell you what’s fair and right when I’m in charge and your throat is under my boot. This was Roman manliness, Roman virtue. Paul said, grow in gentleness. Not so with you, Christian church.

Watch now, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). If someone falters, if they stumble—there they are in their weakness. Go at ‘em! Kick ‘em while they’re down and take their spot. No. You who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. Humbly. I get the picture

of a gardener carefully repairing a vine. We used to grow tomatoes in Virginia that grew all the way up our deck posts to the second floor. Every now and then a storm, or a kid, or a kid who was acting like a storm, would bend one of those vines. If you pushed it back into place carelessly, it might snap or break the other direction. You had to gently restore the bend, thoughtfully, carefully taking the weight off the branches. That's how we move toward one another when we fall over. Not with a kick-them-while-they're-down attitude, but humbly. With a spirit that says, "I could easily be where you are. Now let's get things back on track." "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Well, that's no way to beat someone. I'm not going to beat anyone carrying their burdens. It takes strength to be humble. Gentleness is strength. Weakness is selfish, defensive, self-centered conceit. Puffed up with pride, the weak always have to have the last word. So, verse 3, "If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves" (Galatians 6:3).

Want to grow in gentleness? It's about humility. Not thinking little of yourself—you are of eternal value to God—but thinking of yourself little, a little less. Thinking of others a little more. Jesus called Himself gentle. In Matthew 11 He said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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" (Matthew 11:28-29). That's Jesus. If power is punching harder, if winning means I hit you harder than you hit me, if that's what it is to be strong, then why, why is the most powerful, most influential event in all of human history, the singular event around which all human history spins, why is that a man pinned helplessly to a cross of wood? Here is the gentle one; the gentle Savior, giving Himself away for you and for me. The single most influential, impactful, powerful event in all of human history was a moment of abject weakness and vulnerability. Jesus knows the strength of being gentle. Can you and I?

STUDY GUIDE

GENTLE • GALATIANS 5:22–6:3

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Galatians 5:22–6:3. Silently reflect on what you heard. Underline phrases that seem meaningful.

- In the list of the nine "fruit of the Spirit," which ones would most likely be used to describe you? Which sound the least like you?
- What comes to mind when you think of gentleness? Is it something you strive for? Or do you tend to view gentleness as weakness? Why?
- Paul warns the Galatian church against becoming conceited and against envy. One of the keys to combating these things is fostering genuine humility. What other tactics help in overcoming vanity and jealousy?
- It's been said that humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. What do you think about this definition? Would you add anything to this definition?
- Re-read 6:3. How can we pursue humility in our lives? What tangible steps could we take to develop a humble spirit (in our home-lives, our work-lives, etc)?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

As our church focuses on "gentleness" in the coming weeks, brainstorm ways in which you could practice gentleness with those around you.

IN: Connect With the Family of God

In Galatians 6:2 Paul encourages us to fulfill Christ's law by carrying each other's burdens. Who in your life currently needs help carrying a burden? What could you do to help them?