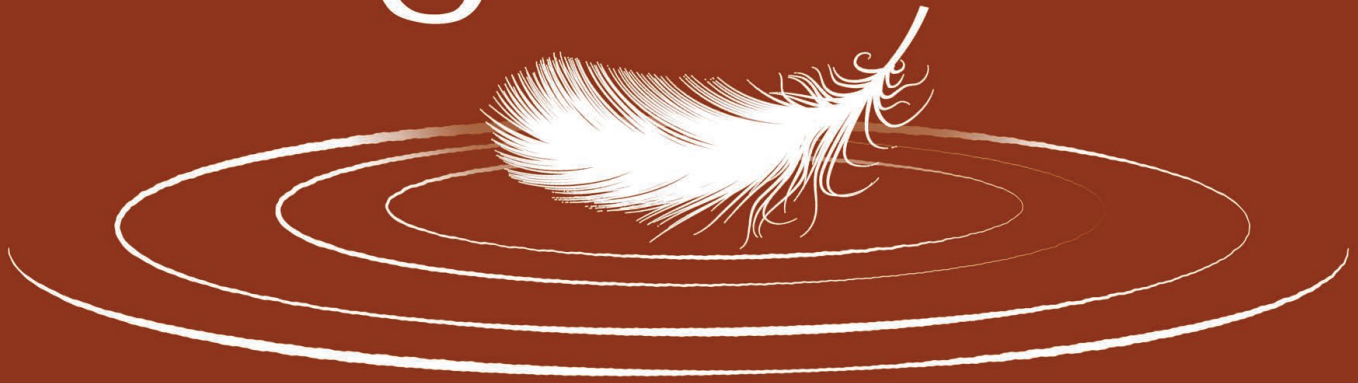


# gentle



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 • 1 PETER 3:8-18 • Tim McConnell • November 11, 2018

Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit. It is a fruit—so it has an ap-peal-ing quality. Sorry. Couldn't help it. Fruit is sweet. Fruit is attractive. I was watching a show about Yellowstone National Park and the narrator was talking about a colorful berry growing there. A bear came along and ate a bunch of it, but the narrator says—“This isn't the kind of attention the berry really wants.” Then along came a bird known for carrying the berry off and distributing its seeds far and wide. “This is what the berry really wants, to spread its seeds and propagate its kind.” I thought that was a little much. Does a berry want anything? Can a berry feel satisfaction at fulfilling its purpose in life? Being eaten and “distributed” by bird droppings, is this really the fulfillment of angst? But in the absence of the explanatory power of a Creator designing all of this, I suppose that was all they could say. The berry has deep existential longings. Anyway, it's instructive. Fruit is appealing, attractive, so that its seeds can be distributed. Spiritual fruit should be appealing. Spiritual fruit should be attractive. The fruit of the Spirit in our lives is fruit that others just want to be around. It may just be something Jesus intends to use to spread life.

“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). Isn't that last phrase an amazing claim? No-where, no time, no place is there, or will there ever be, a law against these things. Profound. Gentleness is the one we forget. You've heard of the forbidden fruit, but this is the forgotten fruit. Someone who truly attends to growing in gentleness will stand out in this world. Gentleness is not weakness. Gentleness is strength. To take that a step further this week: Gentleness is strength put into the service of others. Gentleness will reflect the light of Jesus, and it is something God is using in you to spread the faith.

Gentleness is strength put in the service of others. I tend to think of my two grandfathers here. My son Jack is named after my mom's dad, John Parker. John Parker had a law degree but his career was in the FBI. He regularly left home to go to work for weeks at a time in undisclosed locations and secret environments. He always sat with his back to the wall in a restaurant and was armed. He was a pretty tough guy. But I remember sitting with him on a small stool in his garden gently pulling string beans off the vines. He was gentle to me. My dad's dad was Commander R. M. McConnell, graduate of the famous accelerated class of the Naval Academy during World War II. He was an ensign on the aircraft carrier USS Hornet when it was sunk in the

Battle of Santa Cruz in 1942. He had to swim in his underwear across shark-infested waters to a nearby battleship with only a pocket knife. He was a career naval aviator, bomber in Korea and flight instructor. He was a pretty tough guy. But I remember how he dried my hair with a warm towel when I got out of his pool in Jacksonville. He was gentle. Gentle isn't weak. Gentleness is strength lovingly put in the service of another. We are grateful for all our veterans and their family members today who risked their wellbeing and put their strength in the loving service of others.

The question before us today is regarding the point of intersection, the boundary where faith and doubt meet—where faith in Christ meets unbelief, non-faith, the unbeliever, the Christian world meets the non-Christian world. Does gentleness apply here? What if that boundary is marked with hostility? What if it appears the non-Christian society holds ill will and anger against the Christian community? This is an area we might call evangelism or apologetics. Evangelism is our ability to explain the good news of what God has done through his Son Jesus to restore and save us from sin and eternal death. Apologetics is our ability to remove obstacles of doubt to allow a sincere inquirer to step toward faith in Christ with confidence and joy. As Peter himself put it, “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). There's our word again. Gentleness.

Dallas Willard's last book was actually compiled by his daughter after he passed away. He had been working on it but got sick before he could finish it, so his daughter kept the notes and added the rest from interviews, articles and lectures, to publish her father's final book, *The Allure of Gentleness: Defending the Faith in the Manner of Jesus*. Dallas Willard was a professor of philosophy for forty-five years at the University of Southern California as a committed Christian. He knew a little about the friction at the intersection of Christianity and contemporary culture. He said we think of apologetics as argument, fighting to defend the Christian faith, like building a case for the defendant in a legal proceeding. There are a lot of words to associate with that sort of activity, but gentleness is not ordinarily one of them. Still Peter put it just that way. Why? Because the only way to reveal Jesus is to act like Jesus. The only way to declare the reality of a loving Savior is to display how that Savior has changed your life. How can you declare the good news of a loving Savior without acting like that same loving Savior? “When we do the work of

apologetics, we do it as disciples of Jesus—and therefore we are to do it in the manner in which He would do it. So the call to ‘give an account’ is, first, not a call to beat unwilling people into intellectual submission, but to be the servant of those in need, often indeed the servant of those who are in the grip of their own intellectual self-righteousness and pride, usually reinforced by their social surroundings.” Even when we stand firm to defend the Christian faith, it is not an act of combat and conquest; it is humble service, neighbor love, marked with gentleness.

If reality is what we run into when we are wrong (another Dallas Willard saying), then we need to help each other know what is really out there. Follow me on this. People say it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as it works for you, but there is an actual reality out there. Not believing the coffee table is there just because it’s dark and you can’t see it doesn’t make the coffee table any less *there*, and your toe is about to find out. Apologetics is a helping ministry. Truth telling about Jesus is a helping ministry. Sharing the reality of the existence of God, and of the wrath of God, and of the grace of God—this is a helping ministry. It is to be done as a service. Gentleness is strength put into the service of others. Even where we feel that Christianity itself is under attack, Willard says, “However firm we may be in our convictions, we do not become overbearing, contemptuous, hostile, or defensive. We know that Jesus himself would not do so, because we cannot help people in that way... And that is why our apologetic needs to be characterized by gentleness. Like Jesus, we are reaching out in love in a humble spirit with no coercion. The only way to accomplish that is to present our defense gently, as help offered in love in the manner of Jesus.” This does not mean we abandon the intellect or fail to study and prepare to defend the Christian message and offer thoughtful, reasonable, intelligent answers to the world’s questions, but, says Dallas Willard, “But it will all be wasted unless the allure of gentleness pervades all that we do.”

Peter was a tough guy. Fisherman. Outdoorsy. A businessman. We see time and again that he’s willing to speak his mind, even when he’s way off! Peter is no shrinking violet. His letters, we believe, came from Rome at the end of his life when Paul was also there awaiting trial and the Christians were increasingly feeling pressure and persecution from the mob and from the government. It wasn’t an easy time to be a Christian. These letters went out just a few years before Paul was beheaded and Peter crucified upside down under the despotic Emperor Nero. His letters are full of encouragement to endure suffering and stay faithful,

to not let fear and anger win the day, but to know that God is going to set all things right in the end. Peter is sometimes called the Apostle of Hope.

In the middle of all this, God is going to use the crises and the conflict to reveal Himself in us, Peter taught, as His light shines through us. “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). Clearly, Peter expects something to happen. He expects that as we revere Christ in our hearts, something will go on display. In a nasty, violent, hopeless world a supernatural hope will go on display in our character because we revere Christ as Lord in our hearts. What’s going on inside will go on display outside. And because of that, someone will ask you, “Hey, what is the reason, what is the logic, what is the intellectual basis, for this hope within you?” Then, Peter says, be prepared to give an answer. The words he uses sound like legal terminology—be prepared to offer a case for the defense, an apologetic defense of your position, a careful and full argument. It isn’t all just good feelings and anecdotes; there is intellectual work to be done here. Prepare and answer and give the reason. But, Peter adds, “But do this with gentleness and respect.” You can’t testify to Jesus without acting like Jesus.

Tim Keller retired this year after, I think, twenty-nine years of ministry in New York City. As an evangelical Presbyterian minister, everyone told him he had no chance planting a church in New York City in 1989. (Sophisticated city—people don’t believe that stuff and have no need for it.) But Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City thrived. Keller was asked how he did it, and he said, in part, something like: I listened. He said he listened to the questions people had, he respected them and took them seriously, and then and only then, he offered something of Jesus. But only when he felt sure that the person before him felt heard and respected, and only when he was sure within himself that he could understand and empathize with their position as non-Christians, anti-faith. Then he could offer Jesus. You can’t share Jesus until you are willing to act like Jesus, and the greatest witness to the power of Christ is a life transformed by his intervention. If Christ is gentle, so must you and I be. The questions will get worked out. The details will come. But only after a life touched by Jesus has willingly and gently and vulnerably been put on display.

Jesus was gentle. He claimed this virtue as His own. I’ll say again from Matthew 11, “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). Jesus, name above all names. The Lord. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of all things. This Jesus, through whom and for whom all things were created, and in whom all things hold together. Jesus, the mighty One, the victorious one. Jesus whose name is a mighty tower, a shield and a refuge, Jesus who strikes down evil with a word, drives demons away, defeats the powers of darkness and conquers death itself. Jesus who speaks to wind and waves to cease. Jesus is gentle. Strength in the service of others. This is a beautiful fruit, with appeal, with allure.

What if I suffer a bit in engagement with the non-believer? What if? Nicky Gumbel recounts a conversation he had with Father Cantalamessa, a Franciscan monk who serves the Pope personally in Rome, when Cantalamessa was headed to a debate with the New Atheists in Italy. Gumbel asked, "Do you think you can win the debate?" Cantalamessa said he didn't know. Maybe he would lose. "But," he said, "the Lord can be glorified in defeat." We don't want to lose. I don't want to lose. But the greater loss would be to win the debate and lose the character of Jesus in the process. "But do this," engage with doubters, confused family members, angry friends, enemies of the cross of Christ, engage them "with gentleness and respect." What if I suffer a bit in that? So what? "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18). The life at the end is guaranteed; we can afford a little gentleness.

## STUDY GUIDE

### GENTLE • 1 PETER 3:8-18

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

Read aloud the passage for the week: 1 Peter 3:8–18. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note words or phrases that seem meaningful.

- Verse 8 calls the readers of this letter to, "be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble." How does a community achieve these things? Is this just an attitude to strive for or are there practices which foster this?
- Verse 9 says, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing." Have you ever had a time when you have repaid evil or insult with blessing? What was this experience like?
- Re-read verse 15. Many people have used this verse to emphasize the need to be ready to stand up to defend your faith and it has been used as a call to practice aggressive apologetics. What does it look like to bear witness to Christ with gentleness and respect?
- Author Brian Zahnd says, "Our task is not to protest the world into a certain moral conformity, but to attract the world to the saving beauty of Christ."<sup>1</sup> What is it that makes Christ beautiful? How can we participate in attracting the world to Christ?
- Re-read verses 17–18. Sometimes people talk about following Jesus in a way which makes it seem that being a Christian means an easy life of constant divine blessing and "good luck." However, Peter includes suffering as a real possibility for those following Christ. What might it look like to "suffer for doing good" in our culture? Has anyone in the group experienced this sort of suffering?
- As we think about sharing Christ gently and respectfully with those around us, what tangible steps might you take in the coming weeks to become more effective in this effort?

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

Earlier this fall, our groups named people in our lives we wanted to intentionally and faithfully represent Christ to. (If you didn't do this earlier in the fall, take some time now to go around the circle and name such a person.) Check in on these relationships. Has anyone had significant conversations with these people in the last few months? Have you been able to represent Christ with, "gentleness and respect?"

#### **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?

<sup>1</sup>Brian Zahnd, *Beauty Will Save the World*, (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2012), xvii.