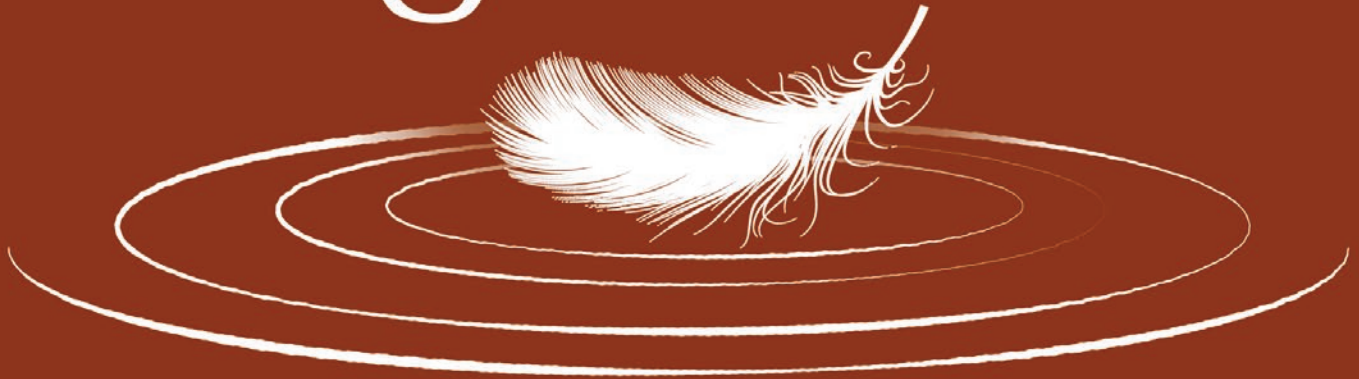


gentle



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 • JAMES 3:13–18 • Tim McConnell • November 18, 2018

Have you noticed that the “common” things aren’t that common anymore? Things like common sense. If it is so rare, should it still be called “common” sense? I once bought a round-trip airline ticket, but wound up driving the first leg with a friend. When I went to the counter to get on the back leg of the trip and return home, they weren’t going to let me board because I didn’t use the first leg of the round trip. “But I paid for both ways, right?” “Yes.” “And I’m only using one way, half of what I paid you for, correct?” “Yes,” he said, “but I can’t help you. See, according to my computer system you are not here.” “But we can both see that I am.” Common sense. It feels remarkable when common sense wins out. So should it still be called *common* sense? There are others too. Common decency. I wouldn’t say *that* about another person with no proof, because of common decency, I wouldn’t use *those words* or talk about *those subjects* in public, because I don’t want to lower the bar of common decency. I can’t remember the last time I’ve been able to take my kids to a sports event without sitting next to someone cussing the whole time. It’s uncommon to find common decency. How about common courtesy? I’d better stop. Can we be a people that raises the bar? Can we—if we pursue gentleness as a fruit of the Spirit—can we as followers of Christ be an influence that lifts the common good? I think so. And I think that’s what we are called to do.

One of the reasons we have become a punch-harder, shout-louder society is that we have abandoned what is common—namely a common pursuit of truth for the common good. Because we have given up on a common truth, we can’t pursue a common good; so we just yell louder at each other. In a book called *Uncommon Decency*, Richard Mouw said, “one of the real problems in modern life is that the people who are good at being civil often lack strong convictions and people who have strong convictions often lack civility.... We need to find a way of combining a civil outlook with a ‘passionate intensity’ about our convictions. The real challenge is to come up with a convicted civility.” We have to learn to disagree without destroying one another. I don’t know if you know this, but some people disagree politically. Yes. It’s true. But civility cannot be abandoned. What would it look like to be civil with each other even when we disagree about politics? The real challenge is to develop convicted civility, or what I call this morning a *Civil Opposition*. Mouw writes, “Civility has its own value, quite apart from any evangelistic or political results it might produce. To become a gentler and more reverent person is itself a way of being more like what God intended us to

be.” How will we as Christians now live in the middle of this ever-increasing, polarized rancor? What does a Christian citizen look like? Gentleness comes into play even in politics.

Politics isn’t primarily the horse-race for positions of power, or the talking heads on news channels, or the ranting strings of comments on social media. Politics is how we order our lives together. It’s a big deal. It is how we live with one another. In a self-governing society like ours—a free democratic republic—it is how we citizens empower government to order our common good—to provide for everyday needs and protections, solve problems and sort out differences to make our society thrive. It is about living together. We just launched a new mission statement for First Pres: “Light and Life for the City.” On January 27, next year, we will flesh that out as fully as we can for you in a Vision Sunday event. But that word “city” is deliberate. “City” is a way of describing how we live together, how we learn to bring our differences into a shared, common good. As Christians, we live with others here in this world, this time and place (for us, in particular, here in Colorado Springs), but our living together is pointed toward another City, another citizenship. We live together now pointed toward the City of God, the Kingdom of God, where God’s ways are the ways and the reign and rule of Jesus extends eternal and complete. A civil opposition governed by gentleness is a rehearsal for the Kingdom of God. Maybe it sounds unrealistic, naïve or dreamy, but it is possible. You can live this way. It takes listening to Jesus now and living as though you are already in His City, even while today you are in *this* city. Get it? You can be rooted in the future City while living in this current city. If you are, you will bear fruit. “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).

James, Jesus’ brother, put it this way in our passage this morning: “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (James 3:13). I said in the first sermon of this series that gentleness and humility are tied together. This word “humility” is the exact same word translated “gentleness” in Galatians 5. James says this fruit—gentleness—comes from being rooted in wisdom. Not just worldly wisdom, but the wisdom that comes down from above. It comes from being rooted in the soil of Christ’s world, Christ’s Kingdom, as we will see in a minute. James has just led us through a section

on using our language wisely, lovingly, to bless and not beat down others. Here he turns to actions in a life lived. You've heard of "Stupid is as stupid does." Well, this is "Gentle is as gentle does." Let your good life, he says—your deeds performed in humble gentleness rooted in Christ's wisdom—let all that speak for itself. Then you don't have to yell louder. Your life speaks louder than shouts on the street.

But we will be tempted to go another direction. "But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice" (James 3:14-16). Seeds sown in the soil of bitter envy and selfish ambition, comparison with others and selfish drive to be more important than them—seeds sown in an us-versus-them mentality—they won't bear sweet fruit. The world around us calls that wisdom, but it isn't. The world around us boasts at how adept they are at it, but it isn't anything to be proud of. Where this so-called wisdom is pursued, all you will find is "disorder" (a word used to describe anarchy; mob rule) and an assortment of evil deeds, but nothing good. Nothing to enhance the common good. Nothing to promote the ultimate good. Nothing of Christ and His Kingdom. "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:17-18).

So, what does this look like? Let me offer you five characteristics of the Christian citizen. Gentleness applies even in civil discourse, so here are five characteristics. Take them for what they're worth, this is just Tim's Tips: (1) A Christian citizen participates in politics, but only as a precursor. A Christian participates. This is important. Participation is not optional for us. We are blessed to live in a self-governing society; to not participate in this process is a way of participating. Non-participation isn't possible or preferable. We participate, but only as precursor. See, this is not all there is. America is not all there is. This election cycle is not all there is. We should gain some peace—some wisdom from above—when we remember that our participation in politics now is not the ultimate engagement of humanity. Whatever the result, there is still a Kingdom coming when all things will be set right; and as we are already named citizens of that Kingdom by faith in Christ, our roots are set in that soil.

(2) A Christian citizen can oppose and be civil. Civil opposition. That's what we are looking for when

we disagree, either direction on the spectrum. Civil opposition. I may disagree with you, but I refuse to demonize or vilify you. James calls the earthly, worldly way "demonic." That's fairly clear. Demons want to make more demons. Hostility breeds hostility; vitriol produces vitriol; hatred doubles hatred. A Christian citizen, with wisdom from above is governed by a gentleness, even toward those with whom they vehemently disagree. It's like this, "Brother, you are as wrong as the day is long—but I love you."

(3) A Christian citizen invests in the common good with an eye on the Kingdom good. Each of these deserves much more than I'm giving them as far as biblical grounding and argument of the idea. This is a very big idea. This is again what "city" is all about in our mission statement. I'm invested in the common good right here, right now, with my eye on the Kingdom good of God's ways, God's work, God's redeeming of this world through His Son Jesus. I do invest in the common good. I do care about what helps the most people live the most fully—in what helps the most people live the most rewarding and most fulfilling lives possible. I care about and advocate for and vote for those things in the common good. But it isn't only the contemporary consensus that matters to me, but the coming Kingdom. Maybe that's a Life Group discussion or something to hash out at brunch.

(4) A Christian citizen honors, obeys and prays for government leaders. We believe God, in His mysterious sovereignty and power, is working in all things to bring His purposes about through those in power. The language here is that we believe government is an auxiliary expression of God's own authority established by God's common grace for the benefit of all. We give reverence and honor to government authority and leadership, even when we disagree. This is where Christians stand for law and order, transparency and fairness, clear voting practices, open decision making, integrity and honor in our government processes. Jesus rendered to Caesar the things that were Caesar's. We pay our taxes. We obey the law of the land. We don't defraud the process to get what we want. Jesus submitted to the authority of Pontius Pilate. This one feels touchy. Don't just call for honor and respect of leaders when your brand of leadership is in power. And when we disagree, we don't grow fruit from the soil of bitter envy and selfish ambition. We are rooted in the wisdom that comes from above, so we demonstrate gentleness—knowing that gentleness is not weakness; it is strength. And it will have its own good effect.

(5) A Christian citizen loves the person more than the policy. Just follow Jesus along through the Gospels

and you see it over and over. I like the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. This tax collector and cheat, who had defrauded God's people for years out of their money, ran to climb a tree and see Jesus. Jesus called him to come down. He ate at his house. The religious were angry: He eats with sinners. It's against the policy. But Zacchaeus—his life was changed, and he became a grand visible expression of the grace of God. Jesus never saw anyone as outside of the bounds of love by policy. He saw them not as outside of the reach of love according to the law, but as under the curse and about to be under the blessing. So Jesus explained at the end of that episode: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). Always love the person more; always love the person in front of you more. Even if they are wrong! And they will be.

It's Thanksgiving. Are you ready for the annual gathering? The great meal? You are about to gather around a table, and—fair warning—every single person around that table is going to be wrong! You will be the only person that's right. Family and friends gather and share, talk between generations, from different perspectives, different ranges of experience, different political bents, spiritual bents, but all with the understanding—we're family. We'll be around this table again soon. They might all be wrong, and you might think you are the only one who's right, but deal with one another gently. Aren't you glad, aren't you thankful, that Jesus deals gently with you? Jesus doesn't see you as outside of the law, but under grace. When you were up in a tree—rooted in bitter envy and selfish ambition, bearing fruit of hostility and division—when you were up in a tree looking for Jesus, He saw you. Cursed is anyone who hangs in a tree, says the Bible. Jesus saw you, dealt kindly with you, entered your home and changed your life. He transferred you from under the curse to under the grace. He did it by taking your place, up in the tree, under the curse—He died to set you free. Gratitude. Thankfulness. A heart overflowing with thanksgiving—this is the response we have to Jesus, and we grow rooted in the wisdom from above, and can be gentle, in Jesus' name.

STUDY GUIDE

GENTLE • JAMES 3:13–18

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

Read aloud the passage for the week: James 3:13–18. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

- When you consider our cultural dialogue regarding elections, religion, child-rearing, sexuality, politics, etc., what sorts of conversations do you see people having? What are the typical "rules of engagement" in these discussions?
- Re-read verse 13. James connects wisdom with deeds done in "humility" or "gentleness" (ραῦτητι in Greek). Consider the wisest people in your life. Would humility and gentleness accurately describe them? What other qualities come to mind when you think of these people?
- Describe a time you truly listened to someone you strongly disagreed with. What was this experience like? How did gentleness play a part in your interaction?
- Our culture celebrates the pluralistic idea that there is no ultimate truth, that everyone's opinion is equally valid, that there are only preferences and varying perspectives. How can we have meaningful dialogue with people when we cannot appeal to a common source of "truth?"
- The church has historically made significant truth claims that are a challenge to the pluralistic world we live in. How do we maintain the truth of the Gospel in a world that rejects the concept of objective truth?
- What steps could you take this week to better practice gentleness in disagreements in the boardroom, classroom, breakroom, on social media, with family, etc.?

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

By engaging in disagreements gently, we have the opportunity to represent Christ to a world that does not see much gentleness. Spend a moment brainstorming the spaces in your lives that are the most in need of gentleness.

IN: Connect With the Family of God

As you go around your circle, identify one person in your life with whom you find it especially difficult to engage in conversation or healthy dialogue. As you close your group, pray for that person and your relationship with them.