

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 • PHILIPPIANS 4:4–9 • John Goodale • November 25, 2018

One of my more awkward moments in church occurred years ago. The church I attended celebrated communion one Sunday, with the elements passed down each row. As the tray of juice arrived, I began to take a cup—but unfortunately, the usher next to me was a little too eager to move on to the next row. He lifted the tray, causing it to bump against my cup . . . causing the cup to tip . . . causing the contents of the cup to pour out all over my shirt. Did I mention I was wearing a white shirt?! The service ended a few minutes later, and though this happened years ago, I can still remember the embarrassment I felt as everyone I crossed paths with saw me wearing the contents of my cup.

How often have many of us held a cup of coffee or other liquid that's been jarred in some way? We've then watched the contents suddenly spill outward onto us or our surroundings. I was thinking this week that the same thing often happens to us on a more personal level. We experience unexpected moments when we're jostled by life or by others around us—and when that happens, what's inside of us inevitably comes spilling out in our reaction.

These moments tend to prompt two consequences. First, they reflect back to us, like a mirror, a quick glimpse of what's inside us. One of my seminary professors referred to unexpected life challenges as a pop quiz, because they abruptly reveal what we're made of. It's not a bad idea to take note of and even learn from what we see coming out.

Not only do these moments reflect back to us what's inside, we end up wearing what spills out from within for all the world to see. These revelations of what's inside can't help but shape others' perceptions of us and even of our faith. If we're honest, these sudden moments of reaction don't always reveal our best, and we may cringe at what emerges.

Our series on gentleness encourages us to consider God's work within; to allow more of it and less of our own stuff to spill out of us. In Galatians 5:22–23, Paul lists nine fruit, or evidences, of the Holy Spirit's transforming work in our lives. Interestingly, three of the nine fruit of the Spirit in this list are highlighted in today's passage: joy, peace and gentleness. We've noted throughout this month-long series that of these nine fruit, gentleness is among the most overlooked and undervalued. At the same time, gentleness seems to be decreasing in an increasingly loud and angry world. So let's take one more look at the fruit of gentleness,

and how we can wear it for others to see.

The best way to describe today's passage, Philippians 4:4–9, is that it's a rapidfire burst of instructions. Within these six verses are seven Greek imperatives, each signaling a command from Paul. The first command to rejoice is so important, he repeats it a second time in Philippians 4:4. The word "rejoice" comes from the same Greek root word as "joy." Our external rejoicing becomes a marker of the Spirit's internal work of joy in us. Perhaps this is why pastor Sam Shoemaker noted: "The surest mark of a Christian is not faith, or even love, but joy."

The Greek wording Paul uses calls for rejoicing that's continual and habitual. How many remember our joy nearly three years ago when Peyton Manning and the Broncos won the Super Bowl? I don't know if you've noticed, but this joy hasn't been continual over the past few years—and it certainly hasn't been habitual from week to week! In contrast, our rejoicing isn't fueled by fleeting emotion or by the highs of life. Paul instructs us to "rejoice in the Lord;" He becomes our reason for and basis of joy. Cuban pastor Moises Silva observed that our rejoicing "depends not on changing circumstances, but on the one who does not change." We look beyond life that too often isn't as we wish it was, and celebrate the bigger story of what God is doing in our lives and in our world.

Next Sunday begins our Advent series, "Time for Joy." It's an opportunity in the weeks ahead to lean into rejoicing as we reflect upon what Christ's coming means for us. Advent can be a time for us to live out what Paul is commanding here, rejoicing continually and habitually. Our act of rejoicing, even if all we can do is barely whisper a few words, keeps the Spirit's work of joy circulating inside. It also creates a reservoir within, out of which gentleness more easily flows.

This leads to Paul's next command in Philippians 4:5. The Greek word for gentleness used here was described by Aristotle as a generous treatment of others. This same word is often associated with an attitude of mercy and graciousness when a response of retaliation is actually expected.

Think again about moments when you're personally jarred by others in some way. Perhaps our actions are challenged, our rights ignored, our motives questioned, or our reputation threatened. Our natural instinct is to defend ourselves, and even push back. Tim noted in previous weeks that gentleness isn't weak-

ness, but strength. It takes strength to resist some of our initial impulses when we respond to someone. In gentleness, we elevate Christ's qualities ahead of our own, and seek to act as He would. Paul refers elsewhere to "the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:1). Like our rejoicing, gentleness is grounded in our relationship with the Lord, for Paul reminds us, "the Lord is near." Only Christ's influence and transformation can produce gentleness in us on a consistent basis.

Gentleness isn't what many will expect from us, because it wouldn't be their response. As a result, our gentleness creates an opportunity for Christ's love to be seen through us. Gentleness is such a revealing characteristic of the Spirit's influence in God's people, Paul commands that our gentleness be visible for all to see—that we be known for this quality. Most likely, anyone drawn to Christ through us won't be as a result of what we know, but of who we are as a compelling contrast to their life and what they see in the world.

So let me ask: If others were to describe what they see spilling out of us, would gentleness be one of the first words they'd use? If you found yourself cringing at that question, we'll return to it again in a few moments. But first, it's important to note that if rejoicing can fill our tank for gentleness, anxiety can all too easily drain it. So we see Paul's next set of commands in Philippians 4:6.

Most of us tend to be pretty good at worry; our minds go where they shouldn't, and our hearts become fearful. We become easily shaken within by an uncertain future we have little control over. Who of us hasn't lost sleep at night or been consumed during the day by trouble that may or may not come? Paul gathers up all possible sources of anxiety with a comprehensive "in every situation." He then uses not one, not two, but three action words to bring our anxiety in every situation to God: "prayer," "petition," and "request." Then Paul adds a fourth element that seems out of place with anxiety: "thanksgiving." Whereas anxiety anticipates trouble, thankfulness anchors us in what God has already done for us.

We're told to entrust God with our situations of anxiety—and when we do, something incredible occurs that we see in Philippians 4:7. Paul doesn't promise we'll get what we've asked for—but he does assure us of God's peace. And he tells us two things about this peace. First, it's beyond our understanding; I interpret this to mean that we experience God's peace in moments we normally wouldn't expect to. I can't tell you how often I've spent time with those near death or

experiencing hardship, and seen them anchored by peace one wouldn't expect to see in those moments.

That's because of something else Paul goes on to tell us: this is an active peace, guarding our hearts and our minds. When these words were written, there was a Roman military base in Philippi, guarding the city gate. Paul is saying that God's peace does the same, guarding us internally from external threats of uncertainty.

As we consider these qualities today, we may struggle with how often we fall short of them. Perhaps we don't rejoice much of the time, or gentleness isn't the first response that usually emerges from us. Maybe we too easily continue to stew about anxieties and concerns we've already given to God. So let's remember that joy, gentleness and peace are the fruit of the Spirit's work within us. They're qualities we don't necessarily need to try harder at, but that we wear, pointing to what God is doing in us.

However, we do have a role in partnering with the Spirit's work and influence in our lives. Paul's final commands in this text may be no coincidence after the ground he's already covered. In Philippians 4:8, he instructs us to *think* ("if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things"). Then in Philippians 4:9 he tells us to *act* ("Whatever you've learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice"). The Greek wording around both thinking and acting is, again, continual and repetitive.

These instructions are a helpful reminder that what we take in and reinforce through our thinking influences the spiritual soil within that God can work with. And what we live out in our actions impacts our alignment with the work God is doing in our lives. Paul encourages us to assess whether our thinking and acting is reinforcing or impeding the Spirit's work in us. We can also ask God for understanding of how we can cultivate healthy spiritual conditions within that allows the Holy Spirit's fruit to more freely flow out of us.

Among the three fruit of the Spirit we've looked at, gentleness is a bit different from the others. We can rejoice by ourselves; we can experience God's peace by ourselves. But gentleness has a horizontal dimension that shapes our treatment of and interaction with others. So let me return to my previous question: If others were to describe what they see spilling out of us, would gentleness be one of the first words they'd use?

If your response is discouraging, let me offer two thoughts that I hope will be encouraging. First,

even if gentleness isn't your first response with others, it can be no less visible in your cleanup of what does spill out. Our apology for inappropriate words or for a reaction that fell short of our best can stand out as much as initial gentleness. And when we find ourselves regretting a response or acknowledging desire for a different one—that's also a sign of the Spirit's influence.

Second, if gentleness feels like a stretch for you, hear Paul's earlier words in this same letter: "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). God isn't done yet with any of us! The Holy Spirit still has more gentleness to carve out within each of us. This exploration of the fruit of gentleness is an opportunity to invite God to do in us what we cannot do for ourselves. And a growing gentleness provides a glimpse not only of the Spirit's work in us, but of God's ability to bring about change.

Make no mistake: we'll all be jarred now and again by others. In these moments, what's inside us will inevitably come spilling out in our reaction. When it does, may we increasingly wear the gentleness of Christ for all the world to see.

STUDY GUIDE

GENTLE • Philippians 4:4–9

IN: Connect With the Family of God

What was a highlight from your Thanksgiving weekend? Were you aware of God at work in any of your interactions? Take a few moments and pray for these stories and God sightings. Surrender any concerns or difficult relationships to the Lord.

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

Read aloud the passage for the week: Philippians 4:4–9.

1. Paul calls the Philippians to "Rejoice in the Lord always!" What are some practical ways you have practiced this in your own life?
2. Some seasons of life are much more challenging to rejoice in. What does it look like to rejoice when life is especially difficult?
3. Paul connects gentleness with an awareness of God's presence in our lives. What practices or postures can we engage in to become more mindful of God's work in our midst?
4. Re-read verses 6–7. Paul presents prayer as the cure for anxiety (rather than the self-medication and worry which we typically engage in). What do you think about Paul's instruction here? What role does prayer have in your life?
5. Re-read verse 8. What in our life gets in the way of us focusing on these things? What steps can we take to grow in our ability to do this?

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

Carols and Cocoa is coming up on December 16. Consider participating in this fun night of sharing a meal and caroling in a Colorado Springs neighborhood, designed to share the joy of the good news with our city!