

COURAGEOUS

Gentleness

**FOLLOWING CHRIST'S EXAMPLE OF
RESTRAINED STRENGTH**

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Feeding the Soul with the Word of God

Courageous Gentleness: Following Christ's Example of Restrained Strength

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgments . . . | 7 |
| Introduction: Is Gentleness for Wimps? . . . | 9 |
| 1. What Is Biblical Gentleness? . . . | 13 |
| 2. Is God Gentle? . . . | 25 |
| 3. Is Jesus Meek and Mild? . . . | 39 |
| 4. Are Christians Known for Being Gentle? . . . | 51 |
| 5. What Happened to Saul? . . . | 65 |
| 6. Practicing a Gentle and Quiet Spirit . . . | 73 |
| 7. Practicing Gentle Self-Control . . . | 89 |
| 8. Practicing Gentle Humility . . . | 109 |
| 9. Practicing Gentle Patience . . . | 125 |
| 10. Practicing Gentle Communication . . . | 137 |
| 11. Practicing Gentle Kindness . . . | 163 |
| Conclusion: Bold Grace . . . | 173 |
| Notes . . . | 175 |

INTRODUCTION

IS GENTLENESS FOR WIMPS?

Recently I attended a memorial service for Wilma, a ninety-year-old saint who was known for her deep faith, kindness, and gentle spirit. I had listened through the years to Wilma's children, daughter-in-law, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, friends, and other family members proclaim how gentle she was, emphasizing that she had never made one critical, unkind comment to them. Coming from a family where members speak their minds and never sugarcoat the truth, I marveled at these statements.

During the eulogy, the pastor of Wilma's church expounded on examples of her gentleness and concluded, "In spite of Wilma's quiet and gentle spirit, she impacted everyone around her for Jesus Christ."

In spite of?

Something is eerily amiss today. This pastor's perspective gives us an honest glimpse into an unspoken belief held by many Christians steeped in American culture. We already know that our culture does not prize a gentle, quiet spirit. We are taught to stand up for ourselves and not be taken advantage of. We are respected for bulldozing through obstacles and challenges in pursuit of our goals. We learn early in life that the squeaky wheel gets oiled. We would not readily admit it but daily practicing a quiet, humble, gentle spirit is not top priority on our list of qualities we pursue to make a godly difference in this world in the name of Jesus Christ.

We want to be people of action, going boldly into the world to preach the good news, speaking the truth, standing up for what's right, and fighting the enemy of our soul. This emphasis embodies our American pioneer spirit. We often equate following God with *going*. Christian stores sell books about revolutionary faith, warrior faith, revolutionary parenting, and revolutionary churches. We are inspired by the image of participating in a revolution or fighting the good fight on life's battlefield.

We want to be soldiers or warriors for God. Ephesians 6:10–17 inspires us to put on the full armor of God to fight our spiritual enemy: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (v. 12). We gravitate to the military imagery of fighting and stories about soldiers in biblical times. We are at war. We want to be filled with the strength and power of the God of the universe and His Son, who defeated death for eternity. We want to change the world in the name of Jesus Christ. This is exciting stuff!

But the idea of having a quiet, humble, and gentle spirit? That sounds weak, passive, and . . . a little wimpy. That sounds like holding back, not marching forward. That sounds like holding our tongue, not speaking out. But here is the counter-cultural rub. Scripture teaches us that those qualities are the most powerful, transformative way to mirror Jesus Christ to a hurting world. The love of Christ is a weapon of unmatched power. Romans 13:14 tells us to be clothed in Jesus Christ. Colossians 3:12 tells us what this new wardrobe looks like: “As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”

Yes, we do put on our armor to battle the spiritual forces of evil. But we also must don the clothing of Christ to tenderly love hurting people in a broken world. We may feel emboldened by Paul's words, "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong" (1 Corinthians 6:13), but we must not forget that the next verse says this: "Do everything in love." Everything? Yes, everything. Courage and strength immersed in God's love should lead to life-altering shifts in all our relationships, from interacting with strangers to dealing with our closest family members.

In this book we will study the tangible face of Christ's love expressed through gentleness. In the first section we will take a scriptural journey to define biblical gentleness, which is radically different from the world's view of gentleness. Then we will ask the hard question, "Are Christians known for their gentleness today?" In our second section, we will learn ways to practice Christ's gentleness in the trenches of daily life.

We will see that Wilma daily pointed the way to Jesus Christ throughout her life *because* she practiced a quiet, gentle, and loving spirit—not in spite of it. And God calls us to do the same. Make no mistake about it. This is the toughest calling. Is gentleness for wimps? Quite the opposite! Gentleness is the response of Christ's strongest and most courageous followers.

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.

1 Peter 3:3–4

The Holy Spirit is the most perfect gift of the Father to men, and yet He is the one gift the Father gives most easily.

—Thomas Merton

The eternal and ultimate purpose of God by his Spirit is to make us like Christ.

—John Stott

If you are not in harmony with the Spirit, there is no enemy who is worse or more troublesome to the soul than you yourself.

—Thomas à Kempis

WHAT IS BIBLICAL GENTLENESS?

Gentleness is never a cowardly retreat from reality.

—Stanley Horton

*A*s I sat waiting with my family in a hospital wing during my father's open heart surgery, we overheard doctors tell other families the surgery outcomes of their loved ones. One family's surgeon was brutally blunt, "The surgery didn't work. Your husband is dying. There's nothing I could do." Then he quickly left.

A few minutes later our surgeon brought us the same news. My father barely survived the surgery. If he lived, he could be paralyzed. He would probably die. Our doctor gently told us this bad news with compassion, and he spent time consoling us. My father died within forty-eight hours. But we were grateful to have a kind and gentle physician caring for us.

The gentleness our doctor portrayed is not weakness. It is not cowardice. Gentleness is a conscious decision to temper one's knowledge, skills, authority, or power with kindness and compassion. Gentleness does not refer to *what* we do but *how* we do it. Gentleness does not refer to *what* we know but *how* we share that knowledge.

If your experiences have been similar to mine, you have been instructed by gentle teachers as well as harsh, impatient ones. You have been trained by gentle coaches as well as cruel ones

who humiliate students. You have been treated by gentle, compassionate doctors and nurses as well as rushed ones who do not handle instruments gently as they examine you. You have been employed by gentle, kind bosses who lead by example as well as angry, critical ones. Your parents may have disciplined you with gentleness but other times in anger. You may have attended churches with gentle pastors as well as severe ones.

I think of Mr. Wilson, my high school physical education teacher. Because I was promoted past a grade in elementary school, I was always younger and smaller than my peers—with zero athletic ability. Mr. Wilson was the first physical education teacher who kindly and gently helped me improve. He was a true educator. He never became angry or frustrated with his less capable students. His patience never waned as he taught us skills that were natural for athletic students but foreign to the rest of us. He always encouraged us and never humiliated us.

One day a friend invited me to an after-school Bible study in a neighbor's home. I agreed to go because I was exploring Christianity. When I arrived, I was surprised to discover that Mr. Wilson led the study. Suddenly, his gentle approach made perfect sense. I didn't need to know that Mr. Wilson followed Christ to observe that he was remarkably different.

Can most Christians claim a similar gentle reputation? Throughout life you have probably formed your own definitions of gentleness. Think about how your experiences with gentle or ungentle people have affected you. Next we will look at how God's Word defines gentleness.

GENTLENESS AND MEEKNESS

The closest translation of the word *gentleness* is *meekness*. If our culture has a negative response to gentleness, associating it

with weakness, it is downright offended by the word *meekness*. Would you have purchased a book entitled *Practicing Meekness* or *How to Be More Meek and Mild*?

Meek can be defined as “gentle, quiet, and submissive,” while *mild* is defined as “gentle, not easily provoked.” The Old English form of *mild* is *milde*, which means “gracious.” Gracious is not only defined as being courteous and kind but as showing God’s divine grace. Do these definitions communicate submissive, weak meekness? Paul assures us that they should not: “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us a spirit of power, love and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7).

Doesn’t a meek person sound like a gentle, timid, and quiet one? It does to me. Yet Scripture describes a meek person as gentle and quiet, filled with a spirit of power, love, and self-discipline, but with not one hint of timidity or fear.

God’s Word describes a meek, gentle powerhouse. Practicing gentleness in our culture requires quiet, determined strength and unflinching boldness. Indeed, showing gentleness is a courageous act.

In 2 Corinthians 10:1 (NKJV) Paul appeals to the church at Corinth by “meekness” (*prautes*) and “gentleness” (*epieikeias*) of Christ. These two Greek words, *prautes* and *epieikeias*, are used throughout the New Testament to describe gentleness and meekness. Theologian Stanley Horton says that the best translation of *gentleness* in our current English language is *kindness*.¹ The King James Version translates the Greek word *chrestotes* as “gentleness” in Galatians 5:22 but translates it as “kindness” in other passages.

Note our Lord’s words in the Sermon on the Mount using *prautes*: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). This is the most common translation. Here are other versions, substituting “gentleness” for “meekness”:

- “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth” (NASB).
- “How blest are those of a gentle spirit; they shall have the earth for their possession” (NEB).

Several verses in the New Testament translate *prautes* as “humility.” This fits with the Old Testament references to meekness. *Anav* is the Hebrew word for “meekness.” It also refers to being lowly, poor, and humble. For example, *anav* means “humble” in Zephaniah 2:3 (TJB): “Seek Yahweh, all you, the humble of the earth, who obey his commands. Seek integrity, seek humility.”

Anavah is translated as “meekness, humility, or gentleness.” Now you can understand why the King James Version describes Moses in Numbers 12:3 as the meekest man on earth while some other translations describe him as the most humble man on earth.

Horton writes, “Meekness is not a self-debasing or a belittling of oneself. Rather it is a true humility that does not consider itself too good to do the humble tasks. It is not too big or self-important to be courteous, considerate, and gentle with everyone.”²

THE SCOPE OF GENTLENESS

You are probably beginning to recognize the scope of the word *gentleness* and its translations (meekness, humility, kindness) as used in Scripture. When I spoke with different people about the topic of this book, most responded, “Gentleness? So your book is about *that* fruit of the Spirit.” We tend to compartmentalize it. We relegate it to a list. This is one reason why

practicing gentleness is sometimes misunderstood. Gentleness may be the fruit of the spirit, but you can see from the previous section that its biblical importance is much broader than that topic.

In Galatians 3:27, Paul tells us that we are clothed in Christ. We are *covered* with Christ. Review the clothing Paul calls us to wear in Colossians:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with *compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience*. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the *peace* of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.

Colossians 3:12–15

Now compare the clothing of Christ with the fruit of the Spirit:

But the fruit of the Spirit is *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22–25 (NIV 1984)

Does Christ's clothing and spiritual fruit look similar? We note in both these passages that the traits come in one package. Throughout Scripture gentleness is always linked to

other related Christlike qualities. Think of them as the facets of one stone. Gemstones have facets cut into them to optimize the stones, allowing them to reflect light. It is a complex process of cutting, grinding, and polishing—transforming the stone into a jewel. Imagine the Holy Spirit as the grinder and polisher of your spiritual facets, reflecting the light of Jesus Christ to the world. Jesus is the Perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

GENTLENESS IS HEALTHY FRUIT

The fruit of the Spirit needs our cooperation for its development.

—Stanley Horton

The terms *gentle* and *gentleness*, which are mentioned throughout the Bible, remain a critical anchor of healthy spiritual fruit. I would suggest that *gentleness* is not simply a quality, trait, behavior, or characteristic. It is a *choice*.

The most helpful way to think about gentleness as fruit of the Spirit is to first realize what spiritual fruit is not.

Spiritual fruit is not plural. God intends for us to harvest healthy fruit, not fruits. The fruit of God's Holy Spirit is singular. It's an all-or-nothing experience. We do not pick and choose from the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22–23 like a breakfast buffet.

“Today's specials are love and peace. Tomorrow you can order patience.”

If we are following Jesus, we desire to daily exhibit *all* the fruit of the Spirit. Remember that it comes as one package. Our fruit is evidence of our relationship with Jesus.

If we were on trial in a courtroom for following Jesus, our fruit would be the evidence that convicts us. It should make perfect sense that a gentle, kind, and loving person is also humble, patient, peaceful, and self-controlled. What should *not* make sense is when people separate these behaviors. For example, imagine a person who presents himself as kind and gentle in situations where there is no conflict. But when he is opposed, he becomes impatient and loses his temper. His demonstration of spiritual fruit is only a convenient act.

Spiritual fruit is not a personality trait. Sometimes we confuse people's temperaments and personality traits with spiritual fruit. "Monica is joyful. Eric is disciplined and self-controlled. Kristin is a quiet, gentle soul. Lisa has the gift of patience." Or we excuse our own lack of spiritual fruit by dismissing the "wimpy, less exciting" fruit. "I'm a Type A, driven person. I'm not passive. I don't hold back. That's just how God made me." No matter our natural bent and personality, we are each called to reflect Jesus and be gentle, patient, kind, peaceful, compassionate, humble, and self-controlled.

Spiritual fruit is not a spiritual gift. We do not receive spiritual fruit like we receive spiritual gifts to build up the body and further the kingdom of God (Romans 12:6–8). Christians receive different spiritual gifts: prophecy, service, teaching, encouragement, generosity, leadership, or mercy. God equips each of His children for a specific purpose. Yet our spiritual fruit guides *how* we share our spiritual gifts. An arrogant, harsh, impatient, or quick-tempered teacher or leader who claims to follow Christ does more harm than good.

Spiritual fruit does not automatically or easily appear. Fully ripened fruit of the Spirit does not automatically appear when we become followers of Jesus Christ. Fruit is grown and attentively tended over time. This process requires effort. The fruit of the Spirit must be practiced, developed, and harvested. The need for daily practice is so important that we will fully discuss it in chapter seven. Our spiritual gifts should certainly be developed and honed to honor God too. But spiritual maturity is our privileged life mission as we long to become more like our Lord.

Spiritual fruit is a single entity. It is not dependent on our natural temperament or personality. It should not be confused with our spiritual gifts. The process of developing healthy fruit requires plain hard work, fraught with challenges, as we rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us, help us, and comfort us.

The Spirit will not remove all disappointment with God. The very titles given to the Spirit—Intercessor, Helper, Counselor, Comforter—imply there will be problems.

—Philip Yancey

RIPENED FRUIT

Pure and simple, how we treat other people reveals our fruit. We long to become perfectly ripened fruit that tastes good to the world. Being gentle and kind are intangible ideals until we relate to someone in the flesh, especially someone who irritates or exasperates us.

Psalm 1:1–3 tells us: “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but who delight in the law of the Lord, and who meditate on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.”

When we follow God, we are like a tree planted by streams of water. We yield healthy fruit and prosper. With our every thought and behavior, we want to resemble our Lord. Jesus tells us in John 15:5: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

As we close this chapter, let’s review the Christlike qualities that are viewed as synonyms for gentleness or mentioned in connection with gentleness. Gentle behavior is kind, humble, patient, peaceful, loving, compassionate, and self-controlled. Whether you think of these qualities as spiritual fruit or Christ’s clothing, always remember that they are inseparable. You cannot practice one quality absent another. *We will bear much fruit if He is in us. We can do nothing apart from Him.*

Matthew 7:20 says that we will be recognized by our fruit. We may deceive ourselves into thinking that inconsistent actions are normal, but we cannot deceive God or the world He is determined to love through us.

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.

James 3:17

PERSONAL RETREAT

- Have you equated gentleness or meekness with weakness or strength?

- How do your experiences with gentleness or a lack of gentleness compare with scriptural definitions of gentleness?

- Mull over the thought that gentleness dictates *how* we share the love of Christ. Can you think of a time when you were more concerned about what information you shared rather than how you shared it?

- Did you have any common misperceptions about spiritual fruit?

- Think about how gentleness and related spiritual traits come in one package. What parts of the package do you find most challenging to practice?

- Think about how you can mirror Christ to the people in your world by being a gentle, meek powerhouse. Do you feel timid or bold?

God sometimes does His work with gentle drizzle,
not storm.

—John Newton

Jesus loves us even when we are unlovable. The Good Shepherd has patiently searched for his wayward sheep. We have been honored by a divine gentleness and reverence that is beyond comprehension. Having experienced this tenderness, how can we not care deeply about civility?

—Richard Mouw

If there be in front of us any painful duty, strengthen us with the grace of courage; if any act of mercy, teach us tenderness and patience.

—Robert Louis Stevenson