

## The Fruit of the Spirit is... Gentleness & Self-Control

**James 3:13-18**

**Phil.2:1-8**

Wrapping up the series on the fruit of the Spirit with the final fruit on the list: gentleness and self-control. I'm taking them together because they have a lot in common and there is overlap in their meanings, which I hope will become clear by the time we have finished.

I'm revisiting a reading from James this morning. As mentioned before, James is kind of a salty character—he pulls no punches, tells it like it is. James stands in the same line as the prophets of the Old Testament, who were the original pull-no-punches, tell-it-like-it-is speakers on God's behalf. What you see (and hear) is what you get. You know exactly where they stand on things; yet in spite of their straightforwardness you know that they care. They say what they say, not with anger, but with tears in their eyes so to speak (and sometimes, literally). James' epistle, which is more like a collection of sayings, is like that. Yet within his salty sayings are treasures of wisdom.

### **James 3:13-18**

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. <sup>14</sup>But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. <sup>15</sup>Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual,

devilish (literally, divisive—because the devil is the divider: diabolos). <sup>16</sup>For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. <sup>17</sup>But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. <sup>18</sup>And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

**Philippians 2:1–8** (wraps the series together nicely, and addresses our topic this morning)

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

When I was 13 years old, my dad caught the Seahawks bug when they came to Seattle as an expansion team in 1976, and with our next-door neighbor went in on season tickets together. And we took great interest in our new team and who the players were. At that same time I was really into bowling. I bowled on teams

and in tournaments. I even had a dream of becoming a professional bowler (seriously). I was that into it.

Well, one Saturday in September of 1976 there was a celebrity pro-am bowling tournament at Leilani Lanes in Seattle. The pro bowlers were in town for a professional tournament, but before that tournament started, a bunch of local celebrities took part in a just-for-fun bowling tournament, which included several of the Seattle Seahawks players—who nobody knew yet; like this guy named Jim Zorn, and another guy named Steve Largent; and Steve Raible; also among the celebrities were local sports broadcasters Pete Gross and Wayne Cody.

Well, as a 13-year-old kid I was enamored with these guys, and so I went around getting as many autographs as I could. Someone (can't remember who) suggested that I go meet Richard Harris and get his autograph. He was a new defensive end for the Hawks. They said he was a good guy.

So I went down the bowling alley asking where Richard Harris was. Someone pointed him out to me, a few lanes away, so I went over to meet him. When I got to the lane where he was—he was sitting on the bench, waiting his turn. When we made eye contact and he saw me with my autograph book, he stood up... and extended his hand. I think my jaw hit the floor and I stuttered something unintelligible, because as he stood up I found myself looking up at this

man who was 6 feet 7 inches tall and weighed 285 pounds. We know in our heads that football players are large men, but you don't know how massive they are until you're standing next to one.

And as I reached out to shake his hand I could tell that my entire hand would fit quite easily just within the palm of his hand. I tried to give a firm handshake, but I wasn't quite sure I could get my fingers around his hand. And I knew that with very little effort he could've crushed my hand. This guy was so big and so strong. Yet when we shook hands he gave this firm but not so-firm-that-it-hurt handshake. He didn't pull me in; he didn't shake hard. It was just a nice firm handshake. And after we talked for a moment, he signed my book and then gave me one of those sideways hugs; again, firm, but he didn't break my ribs or shoulder blades either.

When I think of gentleness (and self-control), as fruit of the Spirit, this memory comes to mind. Here was this very large man, who had enormous physical strength, but who restrained his strength, in this moment, and channeled it into kindness and respect for a 13 year old kid, and an appropriate expression of strength—not just physically, but relationally.

I also have a memory of shopping at Northgate Mall years ago, and watching a Seattle police officer—another large human being in full uniform with

utility belt and all—kneel down to shake the hand of a child who was just enamored with him—called him batman. Gentleness. Self-control. Of strength restrained and channeled in kindness.

Let's talk about gentleness, specifically, for a moment—and then self-control briefly, and see how much they have in common, and then wrap this all together.

The word *gentleness*, in Scripture, carries a sense of strength channeled; of energy focused. Power under control. It's actually a difficult word for scholars to translate into English from the Greek. In addition to it being translated as gentle(ness), we see it translated in several other places in Scripture as humble, meek, considerate, and calm.

In the beatitudes, for example, Jesus says, "Blessed are the *meek*..." Same word—humble, gentle. When you hear the word "meek" what comes to your mind? Or who? Do you have a mental picture of meekness? The stereotype of someone who is meek is that they are diminutive. You know, small-ish, soft, shy, maybe even wimpy. But a 6'7" man who weighs 285 lbs and could crush every bone in your hand easily but chooses to restrain and channel his strength, is anything but diminutive, soft, or wimpy. Blessed are the meek (Blessed is Richard Harris).

And the second half of that beatitude is: “for they shall inherit the earth.”

The meek, the gentle, *inherit* the earth; they don’t *conquer* it. It’s Jesus’ way of telling us that those who take a posture of humility and gentleness—not trying to manipulate or control things with exercises of power—will receive all of the goodness of the earth as a gift. They don’t have to conquer it; it’s already theirs to receive. What a terrific promise, and blessing.

In Philippians 4, Paul says “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice! Let your *considerateness* be evident to all; the Lord is near.” There’s that word again. Gentleness; humility. Restraint. In other words, the witness of a Christian is one of calm, and being considerate. Disciplined strength. Restrained power.

In the everyday common use of this word (outside of the Biblical use) it was used to describe a wild animal that had been tamed. Like a wild horse that has been tamed. That’s a nice visual image for us. Again, of strength channeled, energy focused, power under control. Meekness. Meekness doesn’t mean that a person isn’t strong and doesn’t exercise their power; it means they don’t abuse their power over others. They have it under control so they can bless and support others.

Therefore, gentleness is not weakness. It is actually strength *disciplined* and used appropriately. When thought of this way, it’s encouraging. God’s Spirit

is not making us into doormats or weaklings, but people who are strong, yet disciplined in our strength, for the sake of others. Gentleness emerges from a position of inner strength, and power, spiritually speaking.

And it's not just physical strength that is disciplined and channeled. Other kinds of strength and power also are disciplined and channeled when we're talking about gentleness. For example:

⇒ Strength/power of role. Being in a position of authority, the boss, the leader, etc. And not just in a business or employment situation, but a position of authority in a social setting, or a family. Gentleness means we understand our role as a person in a powerful position and we humble ourselves and exercise restraint (self-control) and proper expression of authority to show respect and do what's best for others.

⇒ Strength of will (we often describe particular persons as being "strong willed"—I'm sure none of you out there are strong willed, but you might know someone who is 😊; I'm asking for a friend...). Gentleness and humility grow and flourish when our tendency toward self-will is reined in, restrained, and channeled and expressed properly. Gentleness says I don't have to assert my will or my way

everywhere. 1Cor.13 (the love chapter, which we've been referencing in this series): says "love... *does not insist on its own way,*" which is another way of saying gentle, or humble. Sometimes we get our way, and our way is good and right. It's the "insisting" part that is emphasized as needing to be reined in. James puts it this way: "willing to yield." In the entire passage we read he seems to contrast self-will run amuck, which wants to impose itself on others and get *its* way, with a willingness to yield our will in order to make room for others, and for God, and for God to have *his* way, for God's will to be done. (note: he says "willing" to yield; that doesn't mean we *always* yield—there are some situations where we must assert ourselves, if we or others are in danger, for instance, or when something is happening that we know is just wrong; we need wisdom to know when to yield, and be willing to do it)

⇒ There are other forms of strength:

- of intellect—brain power, of being learned, which we can use to bless and build others up and not belittle others.
- There is strength/power of resources. Wealth and other assets which can be used to help or hurt. We've learned that

throwing money at a problem or a person can actually cause more harm than help. So even wealth and resources need to be used gently, wisely, and with restraint.

That's gentleness. Let's look briefly at self-control. It's much the same. If gentleness is *strength* restrained and channeled, then self-control means to have strong *passions*, and with the help of the Holy Spirit to be able to keep them under control, and channeled and expressed appropriately. In parts of the New Testament the phrase self-control is often used with regard to sexual passions, but it also applies to other strong feelings and desires. Self-control applies to anger; can we keep our anger in check, and expressed appropriately? Anger isn't bad; it just needs to be expressed appropriately and wisely, so it can be a good motivator toward wise and loving action.

Self-control applies to our tongue, our speech, and what we say and how we say it—where we ask the Spirit to help control what comes out of our mouth (or gets typed or texted) so that we can use our words to build up and bless rather than criticize or condemn.

Can you see how gentleness and self-control overlap? Whether it's power and authority, or passions and desires, we are given the grace of the Holy Spirit to

assist us in channeling our energies into love and service to others. That's the goal for which we aim.

This willingness to yield, as James puts it, this gentleness and self-control, was a trademark quality of the life and ministry of Jesus, the suffering servant, who the apostle Paul says in Philippians, "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited (in other words, he didn't grab for power or control) but emptied himself, and took on the form of a servant, in humility."

Jesus says of himself that he is *gentle* and humble of heart. This means he will not force himself on anyone—he, of cosmic strength and might! He channeled his great strength and power into acts of healing; into words of instruction and guidance, of forgiveness, and appropriate challenge. On Palm Sunday it was said of him in the gospels: "Look, your king comes, *humble* and riding on a donkey." A picture of strength restrained; of power channeled into blessing; a picture of humility.

To pull this all together, the key to becoming gentle and self-controlled, which is the same key to having any or all of the fruit of Spirit growing in us, is a **willingness to consent to the will of God, on a daily basis.**

To submit our will to God's will. We pray this every Sunday in worship, and some pray it every morning—your will be done. That's an excellent way to start

our day! The early Christians prayed at least 4 times a day at set times throughout the day—morning, noon, evening (dinner), and vespers (end of the day, or bedtime). This is the origin of the daily office, and the Lord’s Prayer was prayed at each of these pauses throughout the day; so the Lord’s Prayer became part of this 4 times daily exercise of prayer. Therefore, submission to God’s will was understood as necessary and needed as part of following the Way of Jesus. And we remember that Jesus himself prayed it in the garden: not my will but yours be done.

Praying this prayer helps fulfill Philippians 2: “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” Literally, “let the same *attitude* be in you.” So as we pray and submit to God’s will, and consent to God’s Spirit forming us and shaping our will, the will of Christ is formed in us—often in secret, hidden ways, over time.

But also in clear and obvious ways as we pause and reflect on what God wants us to say and do in a particular situation, and not just what first comes to my mind or mouth. A close friend of mine said that “Never obey your first thought” was his rule of thumb for himself. Never obey your first thought. Even if your first thought is brilliant. Pausing can help confirm its brilliance, or, more likely, it will keep us from doing harm and potentially embarrassing ourselves. *Your will be done...*

We learn God's will, certainly from prayer and consent to the Spirit in prayer. Faithfulness in prayer helps us to get our will in alignment with God's will. And let us not forget that we also learn God's will from the Scriptures. Here is your regularly scheduled plug from your pastor to read the Bible. There is very clear and simple revealing of God's will in these pages!

Let me end this series where we began, with a reminder that the fruit of the Spirit, first and foremost, is love. All of the fruit are expressions of love. Before we say or do anything, we need to ask ourselves the edification question: will others be built up by my words and actions? Will I be built up by my words and actions? Whose needs are really being met by what I say or do? Is it an expression of love? Is it an expression of the Spirit of the risen Christ at work in and through me?

Let me send you forth this day with a great charge and blessing from

1Cor.16:13-14:

<sup>13</sup>Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.

<sup>14</sup>Let all that you do be done in love.