

## **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, which are gentleness and self-control. I'm taking them together because they have so much common and there is so much overlap in their meanings.

Here is a familiar passage from Philippians 2 which wraps the series together nicely, and addresses our topic this morning beautifully:

### **Philippians 2:1-8**

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 servant, 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!**

In 1976, when I was 13 years old, my dad caught the Seattle Seahawks bug, when they began as an expansion team, 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, in the summer of 1976 there was a celebrity pro-am bowling tournament held at Leilani Lanes in Seattle, and I entered that tournament. 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 new Seattle Seahawks players, who nobody knew yet—like this guy named Jim Zorn, and another guy named Steve Largent; and Steve Raible—who is now the voice of the Seahawks on radio, and a local news anchor. 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 suggested that I go meet Richard Harris. Richard Harris was a new defensive end for the Hawks. They said he was a good guy and I would enjoy meeting him.

So I walked 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 walking toward him 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, fingers and all, 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 could tell 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 that moment, and channeled it into kindness and respect for a shy 13-year-old kid. His great strength was channeled into an appropriate expression of strength—not just physically, but also relationally.

In thinking of gentleness and self-control I also have a memory of shopping at Northgate Mall years ago (when there was a mall!), 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—who called him batman. That is another image of gentleness, and self-control. Of strength restrained and channeled into kindness.

The word *gentleness*, in Scripture, carries that 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, or gentleness, 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 effortlessly crush every bone in your hand, yet chooses to restrain and channel his strength, is anything but diminutive, soft, or wimpy. Blessed are the meek. Blessed is (was) Richard Harris.

And (btw) I love it that 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. They don't try to *control* it. It's Jesus' way of telling us that those who take a posture of humility and gentleness—not trying to manipulate or control with exercises of excessive will-force or 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. Let your *gentleness* be known to all; let your *restraint* be known. In other words, the witness of a Christian is one of calm, and of being considerate and gentle. It's a witness of disciplined strength.

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. 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 have their power under control so they can bless and support others.

Therefore, gentleness is not weakness. It is actually strength, but 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, as God builds us up in our inner self.

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, and self-control. For example:

⇒ Strength & power of role. Of being in a position of authority, the boss, the leader, and so forth, and in that role, we exercise our role, our power, to bless and serve. And not just in a business or employment situation, but also a position of authority in, say, a social setting, or as a volunteer. Gentleness means we understand our role

as a person in a powerful position and we exercise restraint (self-control) and a proper expression of authority to show respect and do what's best for others.

⇒ We also channel strength of *will*. Some persons are described as being “strong willed”—I’m sure none of you out there are strong willed, but you might know someone who is 😊. Gentleness and humility grow and flourish when a tendency toward excessive self-will, or a strong will, is reined in, and channeled and expressed appropriately. There is nothing wrong with having a hearty, strong will, as long as we can channel our energies for good. Gentleness says I don’t have to assert my will or my way all the time. In 1Cor.13 (the love chapter, which we’ve been referencing in this series), it 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 David read, James 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, to create space 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. Then we speak up and step in. Yet, we need wisdom to know when to yield, and be willing to do it.

⇒ There are other forms of strength that can be channeled for good and exercised with gentleness and self-control:

- 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. Money can be a blessing, or it can be used to exercise control over a situation, or person, to get our way. So even wealth and resources need to be used gently, and wisely. With self-control.
- Strong emotions come into play as well when we're talking about gentleness and self-control. They apply, for example, to anger; when we learn to keep our anger energy in check, and



expressed appropriately. I'll say it again: anger isn't bad; that energy 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 what 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 of role or position, personal energy, or resources, 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, 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 set that aside, 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, words and actions of grace, and of 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. And even during his trial, and on the cross, he who could’ve called down armies of angels to defend himself and strike down enemies, rather, exhibited quiet strength and gentleness, and ultimately said of his persecutors, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

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*. To put it in James’ terms: willing to yield... to God!

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 (upon rising), noon (lunchtime), evening (dinner), and vespers (end of the day, or bedtime). This is the origin of what is called 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, consent 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 on the night of his arrest, and trial: not my will, but yours be done.

Praying this prayer (your will be done) helps fulfill Philippians 2, Paul's admonition to God's people, when he says: "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 consent to God's will, and consent to God's Spirit forming us and shaping our will, the will of God 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 reflexively first comes to my mind—or to my mouth. A friend says that his rule of thumb for himself is: "Never obey your first thought". Never obey your first thought. Even if your first thought is brilliant, and maybe even right. Pausing may confirm its brilliance and rightness—if we take a moment, step back and think about it—and then we need to ask ourselves if obeying that thought would be helpful. More likely, though, pausing will keep us from saying or doing something that would be unhelpful, or could even cause harm.

And along that line, 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, it's good 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? Can I take a pause and ask God for wisdom, to know if what I am about to say or do is consistent with God's love and care?

Faith Begins by Letting Go