

**Galatians 6.1-5**  
Gentle Toughness

Sermon #11 in a Series on Biblical Change and the Fruit of the Spirit

Preached by Pastor Glenn Durham at Dominion Covenant Church, Omaha, Nebraska, on November 6, 2005.

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**Main Idea:** *The humility to gently restore and meekly respond comes from our gentle savior.*

**Introduction**

Suzy's school assignment was simple: write an essay on the humility exhibited by Quakers. She opened with this: "Quakers are very meek people who never fight and never answer back. My father is a Quaker... ..but my mother is not."

Joyce Landorf wrote *Tough and Tender*. In her book she says that every woman wants that balance of strong stability WITH consideration, tact, understanding, compassion—tough and tender. That is not a bad start at understanding gentleness.

We can be confused about gentleness because some people equate it with weakness. Chuck Swindoll tells of a pastor who was conducting the marriage ceremony for a man and woman—but they looked and dressed the same. Both had long hair and similar, androgynous clothing. So he ended the ceremony by saying, "Will one of you kiss the bride?" But gentleness is neither weakness nor gender confusion.

A seminary professor gave me this coin to remind me that pastoral ministry requires both sides: "tough minded" AND "tender hearted." That is getting us close to gentleness.

A pastor went to the hospital to visit a woman to whom the church had been reaching out and seeking to bring to Jesus. As he rode the elevator, he thought of her persistently sinful lifestyle which brought her into the intensive care unit. How would he again call her to repentance and faith yet comfort and speak grace? When the elevator doors opened the sign said, "ICU: HIGH TECH, GENTLE TOUCH." Biblical restoration is high-tech healing administered with a gentle touch.

As we have done for each aspect of the fruit in this series, let us begin by noting that...

1. We Must Embrace the Biblical Definition of Gentleness (Galatians 6.1)

The Greek word *πραΰτης* (*pra-oo-tace*) translated "gentleness" in Galatians 5.23 and 6.1 is used two different ways in the Bible. First, it refers to the gentleness *we must give to others while we restore*. Ignoring our sister overtaken by sin's long arm is not an option.

Maybe you remember the scene in *The Lord of the Rings* after Gandalf discovers the password into Moria: "[Gandalf] strode forward and set his foot on the lowest step. But at that moment...Frodo felt something seize him by the ankle, and he fell with a cry.... The others swung round and saw the waters of the lake seething, as if a host of snakes were swimming up from the southern end. Out of the water a long sinuous tentacle had crawled; it was pale-green and luminous and wet. Its fingered end had hold of Frodo's foot, and was dragging him into the water. Sam on his knees was now slashing it with a knife.

"The arm let go of Frodo, and Sam pulled him away, crying out for help. Twenty other arms came rippling out. The dark water boiled, and there was a hideous stench.

I like that as a picture of being overtaken by sin. Frodo was overtaken by the guardian of the lake. Sin, likewise, is a monster—a power—a terror—a horrible strength from which God’s people must be rescued. But *how* shall we save and restore? God says, “with a spirit of gentleness.”

We will come back and more precisely define that “spirit of gentleness,” but let me show you the other use of the word. The first use of *πραΰτης* (*pra-oo-tace*) has to do with *how we restore others when they fall*; the second use is similar—it speaks of *how we respond to others when we fall*. It is the exact same Greek word in both uses, though in English we have one word for each idea.

Turn, please, to James 1. The key word (in our translation) is “meekness” and it appears in verse 21. But let’s begin with verse 19 to place it in context.

**James 1.19-21:** “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;<sup>20</sup> for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.<sup>21</sup> Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”

I love what **Thomas Manton** said about the *meekness* which is to be our response to clear and convicting preaching: “When the heart is meekened to obey a truth, the mind is soon opened to receive it.” In other words, we cannot understand what we are too proud to obey.

The pastor who mentored me used to say that there must be times when faithful preaching makes the hairs on the back of their necks stand up! Its easy to cheer when the sermon condemns rebels outside the church—how do we respond when the convicting sword of the Word slices through our own souls? The fruit of the spirit is meekness.

From these two Bible uses of *πραΰτης* (*pra-oo-tace*) I would offer this definition:  
“Gentleness is that spiritual humility  
which both  
corrects with genuine compassion and an awareness of weakness,  
and  
receives correction with genuine openness and a willingness to change.”

### ***1.1. Gentleness requires spiritual humility (Galatians 6.1-3)***

Notice, first, the text insists that “the spiritual” are to restore, and they are to do so “with a spirit of gentleness.” Being both spiritual and gentle, at the same time, requires humility. Pride makes me harsh when correcting others; humility produces gentleness.

And Paul adds more: “considering yourself, lest you also be tempted.” Again, *pride* considers the one who has sinned as weak and immature. “Such has not happened to me,” says pride, “I have not done this sin; I am spiritual; I am restoring.”

“Well—watch out!” God warns 1Corinthians 10.12: “Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” The old **Geneva Study Bible** was correct to note: “They are commonly the most severe judges who forget their own weaknesses.” Gentleness requires great humility.

But there is more to point us to humility! Look at verse 3: “For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”

Do not miss this sharp attack on pride as the essential means for producing the gentleness with which we bear the burden of loving confrontation. Paul is clear: we are not gentle when we confront and restore, because we think we are something when in fact we are nothing. That is easy to forget, is it not? I like forgetting it!

But when I forget Romans 7.18: “nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh”; when I forget John 15.5: apart from Christ dwelling in me and I in him, I “can do nothing”; when I forget 1Corinthians 3.7: “neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the growth”; when I forget 1Corinthians 15.10: it is only “by the grace of God [that] I am what I am”—when I forget, pride takes away gentleness.

**Augustine:** “There is no surer test of the spiritual person than his treatment of another’s sin. Note how he takes care to deliver the sinner rather than triumph over him, to help him rather than punish him, and, so far as lies in his capacity, to support him.” Humility marks the spiritual in Christ.

### ***1.2. Gentleness humbly corrects with genuine compassion and an awareness of weakness***

Some imagine gentleness never confronts or corrects. But such *cannot* be the Biblical definition because gentleness and confrontation occur in the same verse in Galatians 6. Gentleness must have the toughness to correct.

Likewise, this spiritual fruit cannot be cowardly. Did you hear about the recovery group called, “DOORMATS: Dependent Organization Of Really Meek And Timid Souls.” But gentleness is not fearfulness.

**A. W. Tozer** wrote, “The meek man is not a human mouse afflicted with a sense of his own inferiority. Rather he may be in his moral life as bold as a lion and as strong as Samson; but he has stopped being fooled about himself. He has accepted God’s estimate of his own life. He knows he is as weak and helpless as God declared him to be; but paradoxically, he knows at the same time that he is in the sight of God of more importance than angels. *In himself, nothing; in God, everything.* That is his motto.” (*Today in the Word*).

A father with a gentle spirit humbly corrects because he know his need for Jesus; his parenting is compassionate because he is fully aware that tomorrow weakness may prevail over him and he too wants to be gently restored.

On Friday night, at the carnival, his children won four free goldfish (lucky us!). On Saturday morning he went to find an aquarium. They were hundreds of dollars, but then he spotted an old, discarded, 10-gallon tank, complete with gravel and filter—for a mere five bucks. Sold! It was nasty dirty, but the savings made the two hours of clean-up a breeze.

The four fish looked great in their new home. But by Sunday one had died. And on Monday morning the rest were belly up. He called someone who knew something about fish, who quickly discovered the problem: the soap with which he had washed the tank left a residue which was deadly. His efforts to clean destroyed the very lives he was trying to protect. Sometimes in zeal to clean up the lives of others, we may use “killer soaps”—condemnation, criticism, angry attacks. We think we’re doing right, but our harsh, prideful, self-righteous treatment is far from gentle restoration.

**John Piper:** “The way to avoid pride as you confront a brother about his sin is to act only in the power of the Spirit. Look to yourself lest you fall prey to the temptation to rely on yourself, or exalt yourself. Remember you are a basket case of sin apart from God’s gracious Spirit. Therefore, total reliance on him produces gentleness or meekness, and meekness is the twin sister of humility which is the opposite of pride and boasting.”

Gentleness humbly corrects with genuine compassion and an awareness of weakness.

### ***1.3. Gentleness humbly receives correction with genuine openness and a willingness to change (James 1.21)***

Fill in the blank for me: faithful preaching convicts \_\_\_\_\_. It is not “sinners,” because those who know they are sinners already feel pretty convicted. Faithful preaching must convict the righteous. Read the gospels—you will find that Jesus’ most convicting application, “Woe to you!” was reserved for those who thought themselves right before God.

Unfortunately, we sometimes preach to those who are not here. It is easy and often popular to major on what is wrong with those outside the church. A motto I try to remember is: the men who are church officers need the gospel just as much as the man cheating on his wife. The word preached must convict the self-righteous as surely as the unrighteous, that both might, with meekness, receive the implanted word which alone leads to Jesus, who saves souls.

If I could have a wish, I think I would wish to be as good as you think I am. I received such a wonderful pile of letters from you, encouraging me and blessing me for pastors’ month. Thank you. You are either too kind, or too silly; because I am not nearly as good as you implied in those letters. But can I let you in on a secret—you are not as good as you look either.

You look good—sitting still and listening attentively. And while there, we can believe our own press and forget we need a savior. Faithful preaching implants the word deeply that you would run to Christ for healing.

“Gentleness is that spiritual humility which both corrects with genuine compassion and an awareness of weakness, and receives correction with genuine openness and a willingness to change.”

## 2. We Must Deny Ourselves the Opposite of Gentleness: Harsh or Angry Pride (Galatians 5.25-26; James 1.19-20)

Everyone who has tried to restore a brother overtaken in a trespass knows the grief such work can bring. It is rarely easy or pleasant. We seek to do the labor in Christ, for he is gentle and promises rest. But taking his yoke can gall the shoulder if we lack a humble spirit.

Someone *will* soon object that you have not done it well. You have been critical instead of compassionate, caustic instead of caring. Regardless of the helpfulness of your intentions or the truthfulness of your position, your method has grieved this brother and set them against you.

I remember well when the criticisms came so fast and furious at the church in Chicago. None suggested my preaching was unbiblical; none complained that I did not practice what I preached. No indeed! Instead they claimed that I did not care about their needs; I did not consider the lost; I did not preach in a way that comforted those who did not want to come to Jesus.

And you know what? It made me angry. I was hurt. I found my proud spirit rising at once, and I longed to defend myself! How easy it was to grow irritated and discouraged and cry because I was not appreciated.

Know this: whatever work you take on in the church will raise up people who find fault. God does that for you that you might learn the humility which breeds a gentle and meek spirit.

The woman of God who is gentle is not easily offended. She is ready to forgive the harsh friend, the overly critical sister—even the self-righteous do-gooder. How? Because her meek and gentle spirit looks not to be exalted—she is content that Christ is exalted in her humility!

Deny yourself the harshness and anger which comes from a prideful spirit, that you might need the grace of a humble savior.

## 3. We Must Be Cautious of the Counterfeit of Gentleness: Ignoring Problems

Those who gloss over sins and ignore trespasses can seem to be gentle. That is why I took the time to read the attack on Frodo outside Moria. Sin is a monster and love demands we join Sam, slashing at it with a knife. And because sin can stop ears, gentleness must sometimes shock in order to save.

But because of the criticisms that come, we are sorely tempted to hide our eyes from the monster and ignore the problems that threaten God's people. The pastors and priests of Jeremiah's day majored in counterfeit gentleness.

**Jeremiah 6.14:** They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace.

**Lamentations 2.14:** "Your prophets have seen for you false and deceptive visions; they have not exposed your iniquity to restore your fortunes...."

God is saying: "They could have implanted a word for the saving of your soul; but from fear of a frowning face they turned aside and brought a message of peace, when there was no peace." Beware counterfeit gentleness.

#### 4. We Must Actively Cultivate Biblical Gentleness

There are six steps one can almost always go through to develop spiritual fruit. We call them: RAPBAT.

##### **4.1. Read**

Jesus is gentle: "Take My yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11.29). Read the gospels; read of the gentleness of your savior. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God; if you would have faith to be gentle, you must hear the voice of Christ in his word. Read.

##### **4.2. Admit**

Some of you are naturally more gentle than I. But none of us bears the fruit of gentleness apart from abiding in Christ. Admit that you cannot be both humble in the face of criticism for your compassionate correcting and humble in the presence of convicting preaching. Admit that left to yourself you will dissolve into harsh and angry pride. Admit that you need a gentle savior.

##### **4.3. Pray**

Ask God to produce this fruit in you.

**2Corinthians 4.1:** "Therefore, having this ministry as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart." Brothers and sisters, we have a ministry of gentle restoration of sinners and meek receiving of the preached word—and we just admitted that we are not fit for the task. But there is mercy! Do not lose heart! Ask the father of mercy to give his spirit in full measure!

##### **4.4. Believe**

Trust God for humility. Trust Jesus to make you gentle. Trust the Spirit to do a marvelous work in you.

##### **4.5. Act**

When you sense a harsh and angry spirit rising, stop and think: What would a gentle person do? Picture in your mind a friend you know who is very gentle. I know Bob in Chicago; he is a model of gentleness. Think of how he would respond, and, trusting God to produce his good work in you, with prayer and an admission of your need for Christ, act gentle.

#### 4.6. *Thank God*

Thank him, that you are more gentle today than you were. Maybe far from perfect, but he who has begun a work is completing it in you in front of your very eyes.

#### 5. Conclusion

**St. Francis:** “Nothing is so strong as gentleness; nothing so gentle as real strength.”

Some of you know Chuck Norris as an actor both on TV and in film. He is also a martial arts expert, the six-time undefeated World Professional MiddleWeight Karate Champion. He was the first man in the Western Hemisphere ever to earn a 8<sup>th</sup> Degree Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do. He also professes to be a born-again Christian and does speaking engagements with several nationally known ministries, like T. D. Jakes and Trinity Broadcasting.

One evening after filming *Walker: Texas Ranger*, Norris stopped to have something to drink. He sat alone, relaxing in a corner booth, when a big Texan walked up and demanded that Norris get out of HIS booth.

Norris did not like the man’s tone or implicit threat, but he knew that a gentle answer turns away wrath. So he moved to another booth. A few minutes later, Norris saw the fellow walking again toward him.

Norris writes: Here it comes, I thought, a local tough out to make a name for himself by taking on Chuck Norris in a fight. When he arrived at my new booth, he looked directly at me and said: “You’re Chuck Norris,”

I nodded.

“You could have whipped me back there a few minutes ago. Why didn’t you?”

“What would it have proved?” I asked.

He thought that over for a moment and then offered me his hand. “No hard feelings?” he said.

“None,” I said and shook his hand. I had avoided a confrontation and made a friend. I won by losing.”

We have all walked up to God and demanded that he get out of our world and out of our lives. He could have destroyed us. But with a humble gentleness, he wins friends by losing his life. Gentleness may feel very much like losing. Yet Christ has shown us that those who lose, win all. Behold your gentle Lord.