

### Gentleness: Isaiah 40:9-17 + Matthew 11:25-30

When it comes to the fruit of the Spirit, gentleness is a bit like a brussel sprout on a buffet table. It's there because we know it's good for us, but we would rather leave it to someone else.

I wonder if that's how you feel about gentleness. We realise we could do with being more loving and patient and kind. We can see the attraction of greater joy and peace and faithfulness; but gentleness? Well, that's not really our scene thank you. It's a little too weak; a little too feeble. The world is tough and rough and often brutal and we don't want to get crushed so gentleness can take a backseat. Is that how you feel?

But in a world where we are more divided than ever; a world where political and moral issues threaten to split both the country and the church; gentleness is surely high on the most needed list. Without gentleness our debates become clanging cymbals where only the loudest, most strident voices are heard. Without gentleness our disagreements lead to distance and we end up despising one another. And since the church is meant to be marked out by love we simply cannot allow that to happen.

But what is gentleness? Billy Graham defines it like this: *"gentleness is mildness in dealing with others. It displays a sensitive regard for others and is careful never to be unfeeling for the rights of others."* The word gentleness means a stooping low, a bending down, a rejection of strength as a way to dominate and instead dealing tend and gently with the other. So gentleness describes the manner in which we should treat other people.

Perhaps it is best illustrated by the way we would handle an exquisite crystal glass. Gentleness is treating something with great care because we recognise its beauty, its value and the fragility of what we are holding. And if that's true with glass, how much more must that be true with people; people who are made in God's image, who have eternal souls, and who are so valuable that the perfect son of God gave up his life for them.

Now of course there is a time for brute force and strength. If your child starts to wander into a busy road a loving parent won't respond by gently calling them back. They will grab them and drag them out of harm's way. If a person you love is being physically attacked you'll want to use as much force as you can summons to get between the attacker and your loved one and force the attacker to stop. There are times for brute force and strength, but far too often we are aggressive or rude and dominating in our words and our attitudes when we should be exhibiting the fruit of gentleness. It's not about being weak or a doormat or a victim: gentleness demands real strength. And we can see that most clearly when we think about the gentleness of God.

Turn in your Bibles Isaiah chapter 40 and look at the way the Lord is described here. He is the sovereign Lord who rules over the nations: he is so great that waters of the oceans fit into the hollow of his hand; so great he can weigh the mountains like the ingredients of a cake; so great the nations are like a drop in the bucket to the Lord of the universe. This is our awesome God: in his company the superpowers of the world are nothing.

And yet in verse 11 we are told that our God *"tends his flock like Shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."* The God who could crush the universe between his fingers, such is his power, instead carries his people tenderly, dealing with them gently. That is true strength isn't it. Having great power and yet stooping low and acting gently.

Flick over to Isaiah 42 and in one of the servant songs which point directly to Jesus we can see just how gentle this Lord really is. Verses 1 to 3: *"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out."*

The image of a bruised reed is of someone whose life has been battered, perhaps by suffering or sickness; someone who appears to have little strength or ability that would be useful in the church. We might look past person like this, wanting to give our time and attention to some more hopeful cases, but the scripture says that the Lord will not break this kind of person. They may be damaged, bruised and battered; perhaps cast aside by the world, but whilst there is hope the Lord will tend and mend and encourage them gently. The image is of a master gardener who cares passionately for each branch or twig on a bush. As a gardener I tend to be rather brutal, and that's fine with plants: they need a good hard prune. But people are more valuable and tender and so the Lord is gentle towards them.

So think of the way Jesus healed those who came to him: the man born blind who was thought to have been punished by God; the woman who had been bleeding for decades treated as unclean; not to forget the lepers cast away and avoided by society; each one spoken to and dealt with gently and tenderly. The world may want to have nothing to do with people like that, but Jesus does not break bruised reeds- and neither should we.

The second image is of a smouldering wick which the Lord will not snuff out. As Christians we are called to be lights to the world of the glory of God but a Christian who is a smouldering wick is a terrible witness. The smouldering wick Christian gives off smoke rather than light; they are largely unfaithful, unreliable and are often stuck in patterns of sin and ungodly attitudes. They want to change, they want to be different, but they just don't seem to be able to live the right way.

How does Jesus treat them? He treats them gently, tenderly, wanting to fan the flames of Godly passion and being careful not to snuff out what's left of their faith.

So think how Jesus dealt with Peter after he denied three times even knowing the Lord. Jesus could have sacked him as one of his disciples, casting him aside as an untrustworthy servant, but instead he gently worked in Peter's heart; enabled him to face up to what he had done and restored him once more.

Or think how Jesus dealt with the woman caught in adultery. She was guilty having been caught in the act, yet Jesus did not crush her. Instead he pulled the gaze of the people away from her and onto himself; he challenged the baying crowd's self-righteous anger and then dealt gently with the woman; refusing to condemn her but telling her to go and sin no more. Smouldering wicks, frail Christians, are not snuffed out but encouraged and built up.

And if we want to be more like Jesus, which is what our Heavenly Father expects of all his children, then we need to grow in gentleness too. The fruit of the Spirit isn't a smorgasbord where we can pick and choose which bits we like. Our characters and personalities may make it harder for us to grow in some of these aspects than others, but this is the Lord's plan for all who follow Christ. Including me and including you.

So what does gentleness look like? I want to give you three things to consider this morning: Gentleness in attitude; gentleness in conversation; and gentleness under attack.

Here's number **1: Gentleness in attitude.**

When my mother died of leukaemia shortly before my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday I was a terrible mess. The rest of my family was hundreds of miles away and most of my friends were scattered across the country, but two friends in particular really came up trumps. They didn't sit me down and try to talk me through my feelings; they didn't dominate the conversation by telling me all about their own problems and woes; they didn't lay down the law or give me 10 top tips to cope with grief and loss; they simply offered me a place where I could go and relax and be comfortable in their company, a

place where I could take the time I needed to come to terms with my mum's death. They weren't even Christians, but they were incredibly gentle.

But very often we are not like that. Very often we want to share our opinions rather than listen or give space to others. Very often we do want to give advice on lay down the law or talk about our own issues. When talking to other Christians we can sometimes talk so much about our own fruitfulness or Godliness or our efforts or successes that we make those we are talking to feel guilty and discouraged rather than built up. And if we find that others disagree with us, and how dare they, we can sometimes treat them with such disdain that they come away from the conversation feeling bruised and battered and weak. We've had our say. We've made our feelings clear. But we haven't cared at all about how our words and attitudes have made them feel. Instead of helping others to feel at home in our company; loved, accepted and valued; we make them feel worthless, cheap, unworthy and unloved.

But a truly gentle person won't do that. A gentle person will value others, treating them with respect and care as loved children of God. A gentle person won't keep talking because they want to hear the opinions of others. A gentle person will share their opinions but they won't be dogmatic or forceful about laying down the law. A gentle person will be a pleasure to be with; being in their company will be like a warm bath at the end of a hard day. Their presence will be comforting, refreshing, uplifting and up-building. I think that is summed up by Paul's call in Ephesians 4:2. *"Be completely humble and gentle; patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace."*

I wonder if you asked your friends and family to describe you whether they would describe your company as truly gentle. Here's the second thing:

## **2: Gentleness in conversation.**

When we see politicians debating in Parliament very often they are going for the kind of sharp quip that will make it onto the 6 o'clock news. But away from the House of Commons things get far worse. Debates become opportunities to diminish and harm and tear down, rather than presenting a reasoned argument. We've seen that a lot in recent days and sadly that has also been true in the church as well.

Whilst we might have expected the debates on women bishops and same-sex relationships to have been passionate, sadly the tone of those debates became very personal and very nasty. Arguing one's case through discussion and debate should be vigorous. People do disagree on important issues and where God's truth is at stake we should never be afraid to stand up for the gospel and the authority of the scriptures. But whatever disagreements we may have there is never any justification for personal attacks or slander or threat. And I hope and pray that as issues of same-sex marriage come up for discussion within the Church of England again over the next couple of years that whatever our differing opinions we can be gentle and humble in our discussions.

But if this is a problem in the spoken word, it's even more a problem in social media. Conversations that go on through Twitter, through Facebook or through email are so immediate that very often there is no time for thinking or reflection before we press send. As a result, social media has seen some dreadful displays of hatred and aggression, and our inboxes are often filled with emails that it would have been far better not to send.

But as Christians, our conversations should not be like that. We should always be quick to listen and slow to speak. We should realise that words can be dangerous weapons. James chapter 3 speaks about the tongue as *'a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body'* because of the damage our words, whether written or spoken, can do.

And of course this isn't about hard conversations or disagreements, it's about our everyday conversations over coffee or at work or at home.

Gentleness should be a mark of those too. But often even our every day conversations can end up being used as a means to belittle others and puff ourselves up. If we are constantly sniping or looking to make funny quips or being overly sarcastic or pedantic it says to the person listening that the conversation isn't about them it's about you. That kind of point scoring "I'm cleverer than you" conversation isn't a means of drawing together or building the other up at all. It's destructive, not gentle.

And if the conversation is all about you and your issues and you only rarely pause to ask a question and show some interest in the other the effect is the same. One sided conversations are wearing and draining; they don't demonstrate love and they are never gentle.

So how are your conversations? Are they nearly always about you? Are you interested in other people? Do you ask questions of them and then listen well to their response. And when you speak are you always gentle and kind with your words? Do you think through the consequences before you speak or send a message? And are you careful in your tone so that what you want to say comes across in the best possible light? In 1 Peter 3:15 the apostle says that our words of witness about our faith should be shared *"with gentleness and respect,"* but that should be true for all our conversations and electronic communication with one another.

So does that describe your words, your tweets and your emails? Or are you often far from gentle? Do your words build up or tear down? Do they show respect for someone who Jesus died to save, or do they belittle the person to whom they are directed?

And it is no excuse to say that you are just one of those people who always tells it like it is because you want to be honest. That is not a personality trait of which to be proud: that is something of which to repent and pray for God's grace and the Holy Spirit power to change. We must, of course, be honest when we speak and write, but we must never be harsh. Our lives must be marked by gentleness in conversation.

That's especially true if we find ourselves in a situation where we feel we need to rebuke a fellow Christian over some sinful behaviour or ungodly attitude in their lives. As Paul says in Galatians 6:1: *"Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently."*

True words, spoken lovingly to a weak and wandering Christian who has fallen into sin may yet turn the smouldering wick into a bright burning flame. What a wonderful way to help and build up a brother or sister in Christ! But those conversations only really work if we love and trust the one speaking to us, and they must be ever so humble and incredibly gentle.

### **3: Gentleness under attack.**

Sadly, however, the words we hear or the messages we receive are not always marked out by gentleness. At other times people do things or say things which hurt us very much. And when that happens, people often react in two different ways.

Some people react by turning into a hedgehog. They lack self-confidence so instead of standing firm and responding with grace and gentleness they curl up in a ball and do or say nothing until the problem has gone and the danger has passed.

Other people react by turning into a rhino. When they are hurt or threatened their first instinct is to charge and strike back. Their reaction may be totally out of proportion to what has happened to them, or from a human point of view it may look very reasonable, but there is no way their reaction could ever be described as gentle.

But when we are attacked or persecuted or slandered or hurt, Christians are called to respond with gentleness. Jesus taught that we should pray for our enemies, bless those who persecute us, and forgive those who hurt us. He told us to turn the other cheek. That's not about being a doormat

or enjoying a good beating. It's about standing strong, showing self-restraint instead of anger, and trusting in the Lord who is the God of justice and hope and peace and who has forgiven us despite our manifold sins and wickednesses.

And gentleness in the face of aggression works wonders. Proverbs 15:1 teaches this: *"a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."* In 2 Timothy 2:25 Paul tells his young apprentice that *"opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."* And if you talk to Craig Hare afterwards he'll tell you that as a Police Officer his greatest weapon for disarming violent people isn't his truncheon or tazar gun, it's his voice; and that by speaking gently to them greater harm and more serious consequences can often be avoided.

So how do you respond when you are under attack? Are you a hedgehog or a rhino? Do you hide away or attack?

But however hurt we feel our response should be shaped the example of Jesus; who even as he was being falsely accused and beaten and crucified did not cry out or fight back or shout or swear or want to get even, but who reacted with great gentleness, even with enemies.

Is that how you respond? It should be and it will be increasingly so as the Holy Spirit develops the fruit of gentleness in your life.

We've thought about the gentleness of God, especially in the way that Jesus deals people we might describe as bruised reeds or smouldering wicks. And we've thought about 3 areas where we need to show gentleness: in our attitude; in our conversations; and when we are under attack.

As I was preparing this talk I could see plenty of room for growth in this area. If there have been times when I haven't been as gentle as I should have; or if there have been times my emails or texts have been abrupt I

want to apologise for the hurt that caused. I know I need to change, and it may be that you realise that you do too.

Of course the change we need doesn't come easily. Like the other aspects of the fruit of the Spirit it is the Spirit who changes us but we are active participants in this process. So before we move on 4 questions are going to come up on the screen and we'll have a few moments of reflection to prayerfully consider them. Perhaps later you might want to ask one or two of your closest friends how they would answer about you in these areas.

And if the Spirit of God, either you or in your friends, points to areas of weakness or occasions when you have been far from gentle, then don't dig in your heels, come to God in confession. Come to the God who is gentle with us; who carries us tenderly in his arms despite our weaknesses, despite our frailties, despite our failures, and who will not break the bruised reed or snuff out a smouldering wick.

At the end of his letter to the Philippians Paul gives his readers this command: *"Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near."* The Lord is near. So may we be gentle with one another. Amen.

#### **4 Questions on which to meditate**

1: Can Christian friends truly relax in your company?

2: How would you describe your general tone in conversation: aggressive, dominating or gentle?

3: When you are attacked or hurt do you become a rhino or a hedgehog? Why do you react in this way?

4: Are you able to tell people hard truths gently or are your words of rebuke more *'like clanging cymbals'*?