

**Series:** The Fruit of the Spirit

**Title:** Patience, Kindness, and Gentleness: The Other-Ward Dispositions

**Text:** Galatians 5:22-23

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In the ancient Greek world, there was a famous school of philosophers known as the Stoics. The group upheld the pursuit of what was called “Eudaemonia.” While hard to pronounce, the word simply referred to a happy state of bliss. It literally meant “good spirit.”

What is interesting about the Stoics is the means by which they thought one could find happiness. Other groups placed emphasis on things like sensual experiences or the accumulation of knowledge. The Stoics, on the other hand, elevated the importance of virtue. They maintained that self-control and personal fortitude were the means of experiencing a good life.

In their system of thought, the Stoics promoted four cardinal virtues — temperance, prudence, fortitude, and justice.<sup>1</sup> Through bending one’s will and training one’s mind, one could assimilate such qualities into his or her life. Since he was a thoroughly educated man, both a devout Jew and a proud Roman, Paul was likely well-acquainted with Stoicism. When he shared his famous virtue list known as “the fruit of the Spirit,” he intentionally listed more virtues than the Stoics. He actually listed twice the number of virtues!

What was Paul’s point in listing nine fruit of the Spirit? Most likely, the apostle wanted to demonstrate that Christian virtue goes far beyond the virtue the world attempts to manufacture. The Spirit of God can create what human flesh cannot. Many humans continually spin their wheels, trying to be good in their own strength. The Holy Spirit is needed in order for one to experience the good life.

Let’s continue our study of Paul’s expansive list, by examining three more fruit of the Spirit. Interestingly, each of the virtues described below are what we could call other-ward dispositions. While the stoics advocated qualities that primarily dealt with one’s own self, Paul added virtues that had direct bearing on one’s neighbor. The apostle’s emphasis was based on the Lord’s Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). The fruit of the Spirit’s work in one’s life will lead one to have godly virtue toward God, others, and self. Let’s study the other-ward fruit of the Spirit by examining three virtues .

## **PATIENCE**

It has famously been said, “Patience is a virtue.” Paul would have agreed. He added the word “patience” to his list of the fruit of the Spirit for good reason. Since the Lord possesses patience toward humanity (Romans 2:4, 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 3:15), it stands to reason that he would desire such patience from the ones He has created in His image (Genesis 1:26). Furthermore, if the God of patience dwells in the hearts of His people via the presence of the Holy Spirit, it stands to reason that patience would grow in the lives of His people to some degree or another.

### **What is Patience?**

The Greek word translated “patience” in Galatians 5:22 was a compound word. It was made up of two terms. The first was the one from which we get our word “macro.” It spoke of something that was long, or something that existed on a large scale. The second word was one that meant “desire.” It was often used to speak of wrath or anger. When melded together, the two terms formed a compound word that strictly meant “large desires.”

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson, 313.

## **Wile E. Coyote and Patience**

When I was growing up, I loved cartoons. I couldn't wait to see all of my favorites on Sunday morning — Bugs Bunny, Scooby Doo, and others. One of my favorite cartoon shows was one that featured Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner. Perhaps you are familiar with the show. It famously depicted a desperate coyote's many ploys to trap a feisty bird. In the end, the Road Runner always escaped unscathed.

I remember one particular episode of the show. Wile E. Coyote seemed to have set the perfect trap for his archenemy. Within it, there was an especially large stick of dynamite. To ensure that he was able to retreat to a safe distance before the explosion, Wile E. Coyote affixed an extra long fuse to the explosive. While the trap seemed dummy proof, it failed. Somehow, the bird escaped and the coyote's ploy backfired!

Why do I mention a silly cartoon? The long fuse on Wile E. Coyote's stick of dynamite provides a picture of what's involved with patience. Those who possess the virtue have what could be considered a "long fuse." You've heard of people with short fuses, haven't you? Well, Paul's word usage in Galatians 5:22 depicted one with "long desires." Patient people are ones who are able to restrain themselves. They are able to endure and wait before responding. One has said the virtue involves "self-restraint before proceeding to action."<sup>2</sup>

## **Patience with People vs. Patience with Circumstances**

Interestingly, there are two different Greek words used in the New Testament to speak of patience. One was used specifically in reference to circumstances. The other pointed precisely to patience with people. Paul showed the difference between the two forms of patience in his second letter to the church at Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 6:4, he made mention of his patience with difficult circumstances. Two verses later, he spoke of his patience in regard to difficult people (2 Corinthians 6:6). This second form of patience is what Paul upheld in his list of the fruit of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

As Christians, we are to seek God's help in developing a patient and forbearing attitude toward others. We all have people in our lives that seem to irk us. Don't we? Each of us is left to marvel at how difficult some people can be. Be of good cheer. Even Jesus had to exclaim on one occasion, saying, "You unbelieving generation, how long will I be with you? How long must I put up with you?" (Mark 9:19).

## **Growing in Patience**

Through our relationship with the Lord, we can learn to be more patient with people. This is true, first of all, because God Himself is patient with people. When Paul wrote of his salvation experience, he said, "But I received mercy for this reason, so that in me, the worst of them, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his extraordinary *patience* as an example to those who would believe in him for eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:16). The Greek word rendered "patience" in 1 Timothy 1:16 is the same one found in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit. By saving a murdering man like Paul, the Lord left a memorial for all generations to testify of his immense patience toward all of humanity.

Paul's testimony informs us that our God is a patient God, but it also informs us of much more. It shows us where we can find the capacity to grow in patience. It seems that everyone wants to grow in this virtue. As a pastor, I can't count the number of people who have confided in me, saying something like, "Pastor, pray for me. I really need to grow in my patience."

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<sup>2</sup> Zodhiates, 938.

<sup>3</sup> Zodhiates, 938.

Most all of us would admit we need development in this area. Paul's reference to the the Lord's "extraordinary patience" tells us where we can find help. The gospel is our means of power. The God of all patience sent His Son to die for our sins. That same Son was raised, demonstrating His power over sin and death. He is now seated at the right hand of God the Father; however, His Spirit now dwells within His children on Earth.

Through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our souls, we are now spiritually wired with an ability to grow in our demonstration of patience toward others. We simply need to learn to walk in the Spirit so that the spirit can grow this virtue in our lives (Galatians 5:16). In one of his other letters, Paul indicated that the Third Person of the Trinity is our primary means of developing this virtue in our lives. When he wrote out his prayer for the Colossians, he said, "We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will...being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, so that you may have great endurance and patience, joyfully" (Colossians 1:9, 11).

Do you need to grow in patience? The Holy Spirit is your helper. You will never gain mastery over the flesh through your own effort or resources. Your God is a patient God. You are called to be like Him, but you can't produce patience on your own. The only way you can become like Him is through His Spirit. Through an abiding relationship with Him, He can transform your emotions and your thought patterns. He can make patience grow where it seems weak. Learn to live by His Spirit.

### **A Call to Patience**

The New Testament continually urges believers to build their capacity for patience. See passages like Ephesians 3:2 and Colossians 3:12. One Scripture that is especially challenging to me is Hebrews 6:11-12. It says, "Now we desire each of you to demonstrate the same diligence for the full assurance of your hope until the end, so that you won't become lazy but will be imitators of those who inherit the promises through faith and *perseverance*." The word translated "perseverance" was the same one used for patience, the eighth fruit of the spirit.

The author of Hebrews knew that believers are sometimes tested to quit on God, or simply coast spiritually, because of the suffering and strain often involved with following Christ. May we learn to receive strength from the Spirit in order to keeping going and endure. Patience is a necessary virtue for faithful Christ followers. In his seventeenth century work entitled "The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment," the puritan Jeremiah Burroughs said, "The truth is that not only wicked men, but sometimes the very saints of God find the beginning of this, when an affliction remains for a long time and is very severe and heavy indeed upon them, and strikes them, as it were, in the master vein. They find in their hearts something of a rising against God, their thoughts begin to bubble, and their affections begin to move against God Himself."<sup>4</sup>

Impatience toward God and others is often the secret, besetting sin of many modern believers. Many are guilty of a short-term perspective that leads them to short-tempered personalities. Such was the error of Job's wife. When the calamity of crises came to Job's house, she urged him, "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). Impatience with life or other people ultimately involves an impatience with God. May the Lord give us grace to be more patient in all domains of life.

### **KINDNESS**

Kindness may be one fruit of the Spirit that doesn't need much explanation. Most of us have a clear conception what is involved with the virtue — a smiling face, a helpful spirit, and a thoughtful regard for others. One has rightly defined kindness as "showing goodness and

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<sup>4</sup> Burroughs, 29.

concern toward one's neighbor." Kindness is an empathy and sympathy for others that fuels a concern for others.<sup>5</sup>

Scripture instructs us to pursue such virtue. In Colossians 3:12, we read, "Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, *kindness*...". The Greek word rendered "kindness" is one that was regarded as antonym for the word used of one who was severe or harsh. You can see the two traits contrasted in Romans 11:22, a passage in which Paul explained the way in which God is kind through His grace but severe in His justice.

### **An Unkind Church**

Such an emphasis on kindness was necessary for the church at Galatia. Remember, spiritually unhealthy teachers were peddling a false gospel (Galatians 1:6-7). They pushed the requirements of the Mosaic Law upon the church. It seems that many of the legalistic teachers were harsh and severe in their promotion of pet doctrines. Those who resisted the gospel of circumcision were roughly shunned and ostracized. Perhaps it was for that reason that Paul would later say the following: "...if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another" (Galatians 5:15). In the midst of such antagonism, Paul encouraged a spiritual revival of kindness.

As children of grace who have escaped the coming judgment, the Lord's people are called to be kind. Justice and vengeance belong to the Lord (Romans 12:19), so there is little to no place for harsh and severe treatment in the kingdom of Christ. Kindness is what we could call a "one-another" virtue. It is a fulfillment of the second half of the Great Commandment. Since we are called to "love one another" (John 15:12) and love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:39), it is commonsensical that we should pursue after kindness.

### **It's Hard to Be Kind**

While it may be rather easy to define kindness, developing it and displaying it is a lot more difficult. Not long ago, I read a book entitled, "The Power of Nice: How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness." Jay Leno wrote the forward for the book. In it, Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval offered eye-opening reports on the powerful benefits of kindness in the workplace. They also shared several helpful tips. The national bestseller opened with the following words, "So many of today's problems can be solved with simple acts of kindness...Life is not that hard. Try giving a little. You would be surprised at how much you get back."<sup>6</sup>

While I gleaned a lot from the book, I walked away with an empty feeling. As a Christian, I realized I had no power to produce the type of kindness the authors promoted. I sensed a deep dread within, a profound unsettledness concerning my own sin. Like the apostle Paul, I often have had to cry out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24). The confines and carnality of my mere humanity have often made me feel as if kindness is impossible. Irritations and selfishness often run rampant in my heart and mind. I know from personal experience — producing the fruit of kindness is impossible in the power of human flesh!

I'm thankful that my struggle is a common one. I know I am not alone. No, I haven't surveyed a lot of people to find out whether or not they have a hard time with kindness. Instead, I have found a passage of Scripture that confirms my suspicions. Many people are familiar with Paul's famous statement in Romans 3:10 wherein he said, "There is no one righteous, not even

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<sup>5</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers, 431.

<sup>6</sup> Thaler, Linda Kaplan and Robin Koval. *The Power of Nice: How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness*. (New York, NY: Currency, Doubleday, 2006), xiv.

one.” A couple verses later, he also said, “There is no one who does what is *good*, not even one” (Romans 3:12). It is fascinating to me that the Greek word rendered “good” in that verse is the same one used of “kindness” in Galatians 5:22. According to Scripture, not one single human being has the capacity to produce kindness through his or her own flesh.

### **The Gospel of Kindness**

Kindness only grows in our lives through God. Thankfully, our God is not a severe and austere God. He is kind. Though He will pour out a severe judgment on humanity at the end of time (Revelation 19:11-16, 20:11-15), His judgment will actually be an act of kindness for those He loves. God is kind. He can do no other. He is love (1 John 4:8) and He is full of kindness.

His gospel is perhaps the most full and perfect display of kindness humanity has ever seen. Scripture consistently names the virtue as being part and parcel of the gospel message. In Ephesians 2:6-7, we read, “He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.” Titus 3:4-5 says, “ But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

If we want to grow in kindness, we must grow in our understanding and experience of the gospel. Jesus’ victory over sin and death has broken the bonds of harshness. We don’t have to be mean, irritable, unruly, or surly. Because Jesus was kind in offering Himself for us, our conversation, countenance, and conduct can be kind toward others. His indwelling presence through the Holy Spirit can enliven our souls, manifesting shows of sympathy and compassionate regard from our lives. When the eyes of faith are fixed firmly on the God of kindness, a spiritual metamorphosis can occur. Kindness can grow in what would normally be a barren wasteland of calloused coldness.

### **GENTLENESS**

If I was given the task of listing the top qualities I would like to assimilate into my life, apart from a consideration from Scripture, I doubt I would include the word “gentle.” The virtue doesn’t seem like a really manly one by many accounts; yet, Paul, writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, encouraged his readers to seek the assimilation of gentleness into their lives.

Paul knew the Galatians were a headstrong bunch. There were apparently a lot of bickering in the church. They fought tirelessly over the subject of circumcision. In addition, there were some members who had been caught in some sort of sin. The church wasn’t doing a good job of restoring the erring brothers and sisters. They were a bit rough in calling others to repentance. That’s why Paul would later say, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so that you also won’t be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). The Greek word translated “gentle” in Galatians 6:1 is the same one rendered “gentleness” in Galatians 5:23. The Galatians were in dire need of the eighth fruit of Spirit.

The people at Galatia weren’t the only people in need of a gentle spirit. Believers of all generations are called to develop such virtue. The call to follow Christ involves a call to be gentle. Consider what James told his readers: “Who among you is wise and understanding? By his good conduct he should show that his works are done in the gentleness that comes from wisdom” (James 3:13). The entirety of a believer’s life is to ooze with an aura of gentleness. Paul upheld the virtue as a welcome addition to the sanctification process in Ephesians 4:1-2 and Colossians 3:12.

## **What is Gentleness?**

As I mentioned earlier, the concept of gentleness is one to which many Americans may be averse. Who wants to be perceived as gentle? Doesn't such a quality imply weakness? With the way today's society works, gentle people will likely get run over! Who wants to be taken advantage of? Gentleness may seem spiritual, but it won't get you very far in life, or so the thinking goes.

It helps if we define the quality of which Paul spoke. One has defined the term as a virtue that involves a sense of courtesy and considerateness.<sup>7</sup> It is important that we not regard such qualities as being equivalent with some sort of weakness. There is a form of American Christianity that espouses supposed manly virtues and traits while overlooking and neglecting simple biblical virtues. Many American men are being led by celebrity-status Christian leaders and authors who are more concerned with a cultural conception of manhood than a biblical conception of manhood. For such individuals, gentleness is something for the effeminate. It should be shunned in favor of rugged individuality that supposedly "stands up" for truth and righteousness.

Christians should be careful to let the Lord and His Word set the tone for what godly virtue actually entails. Far from being a sign of weakness, the gentleness the Spirit produces is a sign of godly self-restraint. It involves the ability to reign oneself in, to hold back from harsh outbursts, and to display an authentic meekness of Spirit. Gentleness is the ability to be kind when wrath might be the more natural response. One has defined the virtue as a "...strength that accommodates to another's weakness."<sup>8</sup> Fittingly, the gentleness the Spirit produces has often been called "power under control."

In the words of one Bible teacher, gentleness "is an inwrought grace of the soul" that affects one's "relations to his fellow man."<sup>9</sup> The virtue has a marked effect on one's natural disposition. It changes expressions, speech patterns, body language, and overall demeanor. As a result, the gentle person communicates Christian love and kind regard through his or her presence.

## **Gentleness toward God**

There is a degree to which the eighth fruit of the Spirit is also directed toward God. The one who is meek toward the Lord maintains a posture of life that is submissive to His decrees and desires. Such a posture is the opposite of the one Paul possessed prior to his conversion. When the Lord appeared to the man formerly known as Saul, He said, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14). Reading of Paul's conversion account, one is compelled to ask, "What in the world are goads?" Second, "In what way did Paul kick against goads, and what does such an action have to do with Christian conversion?"

The Lord's question concerning goads and kicking was meant to underscore Saul's lack of gentleness toward the Lord's truth. Through the way in which the man persecuted the church, he exhibited a hostility toward God and God's Word. There are some Christians who exhibit a similar surliness in spiritual matters. They are often found kicking against the the goads of God's truth, God's sovereignty, and God's providence. It is for this reason that James used the same Greek word for gentleness in Galatians 5:22 to say, "Therefore, ridding yourselves of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, humbly receive the implanted word, which is able to save you souls" (James 1:21).

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<sup>7</sup> Gingrich and Danker, 166.

<sup>8</sup> Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 326).

<sup>9</sup> Zodhiates, 1210.

By the Spirit's help, believers can develop a meekness toward the things of God that results in further spiritual growth. Such a gentleness was exhibited in the life of Eli, one of the foremost prophets of God in Israel's history. Though the man was a senior statesman in Israel, the Lord had plans to bring the man's ministry, family, and life to an end. The rebellion of Eli's sons had provoked the Lord to anger.

Instead of appearing directly to the prophet, the Lord signified his readiness to move on from Eli by appearing to a young, soon-to-be prophet — Samuel. In His first revelation to the young man, the Lord revealed that He was about to judge Eli's family on account of the idolatry of Eli's sons (1 Samuel 3:13). Knowing that the Lord had appeared to Samuel, the elder prophet inquired concerning the nature of the revelation the young man had received. Samuel was initially hesitant, but he eventually delivered the staggering news concerning God's pending judgment.

Instead of barking back with harsh obstinance to the horrific revelation, Eli responded gently. He said, "He is the Lord. Let him do what he thinks is good" (1 Samuel 3:18). What an amazing response! We need a receptivity to God's revelation. We need the maturity Eli possessed. Fortunately, the Spirit of God can create such a gentleness to the Word of God in our lives.

### **Only by the Spirit**

Paul knew his readers needed the type of meekness Eli possessed. Their lives were lacking in Spirit-wrought gentleness toward God and others. The problem wasn't just that they were deficient in this quality. They also lacked the skills to cultivate such a gentleness. It is for this reason that Paul shared his list of the fruit of the Spirit. His readers needed to look to the Spirit for help in developing the virtue God desired. Neither ceremonial observances or legalistic religiosity could create gentle souls in Galatia. The believers in the church needed a work of the Holy Spirit in their souls and minds.

Paul didn't just preach about gentleness; he also practiced it. In his second letter to the church at Corinth, he testified that his ministry was marked "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:1). Even in confronting the error of first-century churches, the apostle retained a spirit of softness and understanding. He kept his emotions under control. From personal experience, the once brash, murdering Saul learned of how the Spirit could make one gentle and meek in dealing with unruly people. He wanted his readers to grow as he had grown.

### **Gentleness and the Modern Church**

It should go without saying, but gentleness is an important virtue for modern believers. Social media and the capacities of the internet have created countless armchair theologians. Along with their leagues, there are also scores of new, self-minted experts on all areas of life — politics, social activism, sports, health matters, and the like. It seems a spirit of combativeness has descended on society, as most seem to operate by the mantra of, "The one with the loudest voice wins!"

We are surrounded by a spirit of error and egotism that may beckon many of us to adopt a roughshod approach to representing the faith. It is worth remembering Paul's reference to gentleness. We must seek the Spirit's help in growing this virtue in our lives. We will never be like Christ, and we will never be good witness for Him, if we represent Him through a militant mindset that only seems interested in winning an argument. If we respond to the error of this world by acting like the world, we may never make any difference in the world.

Additionally, it is important for modern Christians to cultivate a gentle disposition toward God. Our pragmatic society silently promotes a me-centered spirit of entitlement. In such a

system of thinking, God is often regarded as a pawn to achieve one's desires. As a result, adherents to modern conceptions of God often bristle at doctrines related to God's providence and sovereignty. In the end, most feel they have the right to pick and choose which parts of God's Word seem applicable to his or her life.

The Lord is robbed of the honor and glory He deserves from those who regard Him as a lackey who exists to fulfill their wishes. The remedy to such hollow religion is found in the virtue of gentleness. May we seek the Spirit's help in developing a soft frame of mind toward God and His will. May we be ones who say with Eli, "He is the Lord. Let him do what he thinks is good" (1 Samuel 13:18).