

The Ripe Life sermon series
2 – Gentleness – Ephesians 4:1-6
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Last year, I did one of those DNA tests through a genealogy website. If you're not familiar with it, what you do is put some spit in a test tube, send it to a lab, and they send you back a complete DNA story about your forefathers and foremothers and the regions of the world from which you most likely descended. My results were fascinating! I found that 71% of my DNA was from Great Britain, 16% was from Ireland, 8% was from Sweden, and 5% was made up of BBQ sauce. I guess you're not supposed to collect your spit right after lunch.

While our physical DNA varies from person to person, as followers of Christ, our spiritual DNA has the same place of origin, which is the heart and teachings of Jesus Christ. For our sermon series, we're looking at the fruit of the Spirit that Paul gives us in Galatians – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – and we're figuring out how we can best live out these core values. We know they are a part of our spiritual DNA, but we also know this world can dampen our ability to embody them as we live our lives.

Today, we're talking about gentleness. For me, this is one of the more nebulous of the fruits. What exactly does it mean to be "gentle"? It's not a trait that we talk a lot about or use to describe someone. "Have you met my friend Sam? You'll like him. He's gentle." And yet, just saying the word "gentle" makes me want to lower my voice and talk in a quieter tone. Considering the amount of noise around us, that alone is a good reason to work on being more gentle.

The dictionary defines "gentle" as "having or showing a mild, kind, or tender temperament or character." When I think of someone who is gentle, I think of soft-spoken, calm, not loud or boisterous. Mr. Rogers. Forrest Gump. It may be easier to define gentleness by saying what it's not: harsh, rough, violent, abusive, aggressive.

Sadly, that second set of words seems like a more accurate description of our world today. I read that the average TV viewer witnesses 18,000 violent interactions every year. Wow, that's a lot! We've become desensitized to the harshness around us, so much so that we forget what it means to be gentle. In our open-mic culture that is exacerbated by the availability of social media, we can say whatever is on our mind without reaping the consequences of seeing the other person's reaction. It's a lot easier not to be gentle when you don't have to look the other person in the eye.

When I think of what it means to be gentle, I think of chopsticks. I'm fairly new to the sushi world, so in the last year I've been learning about the different kinds of sushi and how to properly eat it. I'd never used chopsticks before, and I've learned it's harder than it looks. You have to apply just the right amount of pressure to pick up the sushi roll. Not enough pressure and it slips and falls. Too much pressure and you'll shoot it across the table into your dining partner's ice water. You have to hold the chopsticks firmly, but not too firm. You have to be gentle.

One commentator described gentleness as the halfway point between excessive anger and complete passivity. As followers of Christ, we're not called to be doormats, but we're also not called to step on others. The Bible connects gentleness with meekness and humility, two more traits frowned upon in today's society. The prevailing wisdom is you can't get ahead in this world without elbowing your way through in this dog-eat-dog world. It's hard to be gentle today.

To learn what gentleness looks like, we turn to our source for all the fruits, which is God. Do you think of God as gentle? It's not the first characteristic that comes to my mind, especially the God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. That God has a reputation for being aggressive, vengeful, even violent. And yet, we hear some of the most tender statements from God in these pages. Take Isaiah 40, for example. In describing God, Isaiah starts with, "The Lord comes with might." Now, you might expect the next few verses to describe God as a vanquishing warrior or a powerful entity, and yet, Isaiah says, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."

That highlights the paradoxical nature of gentleness. It doesn't necessarily mean an absence of strength. It means strength under control. One author defined gentleness as "the strength of being tender." Just because we have power – and we all have power, thanks to God giving us free will – doesn't mean you have to use it in powerful ways. Exercising gentleness means holding things entrusted to us with great care and concern.

I learned this while I was a student in seminary. I was doing my first funeral, which was only a tiny bit terrifying. It was for Gladys, a dear member of the church. While I was helping the funeral director set up the sanctuary before the service, I had my back to him, and he said, "Here, can you hold this for a second?" So, I turned around and held out my hands, and he handed me Gladys. More specifically, he handed me the urn with Gladys's ashes. I had never seen a dead body before, much less held one in my hands. I don't think I breathed for the next two minutes until he took Gladys away from me. How I held that urn is what I envision when I think of gentleness.

Of course, the best example of gentleness for us comes from Jesus. He is described as a lamb, he was a king born as a little baby in a manger, he rode a donkey into Jerusalem, he washed his disciples' feet. While he had his moments of frustration and anger, for the most part, his interactions with others were defined by gentleness, especially with people who were used to be treated less than gently by the world. He spoke lovingly to a foreign Samaritan woman, he spent time with a woman caught in adultery, he welcomed little children into his presence, he touched lepers and conversed with those possessed by demons. He used chopsticks where the world was using knives and spears.

So, how do we follow Jesus' example today when our world bombards us with violence and aggressiveness and tempts us to respond in kind? How do we exhibit gentleness, especially when others aren't gentle toward us? I faced this challenge not too long ago. I was walking our dog Jack when a woman came toward us from the other direction. When she saw us, her body tensed up, her face scrunched up, and she shouted at me in a hateful tone, "Don't let that dog bite me!" Now, I'll admit my first inclination was to let Jack off his leash and yell, "Sic 'em!" But Jack would have just licked her to death. Instead, I calmly responded that I had a good hold on him, he was friendly, and that she was welcomed to pet him if she wanted.

What I recognized was that there was a reason that woman came at me so aggressively. She probably had an experience in her past where she had been attacked by a dog, so she approached each interaction with dogs with the expectation it was going to happen again. So, instead of responding to her with my own anger, I tried to be sensitive to the fact that she was a person in need of gentleness.

What keeps us from being gentle? Some people make it difficult to be gentle with them, but others make it easy. Think of the people with whom we are most gentle. What people illicit from us – even the most hardened among us – quieter voices, softer hands, a feeling of great care

and concern? It's babies. We don't toss babies around like footballs. We hold them like the precious gifts they are because they are fragile and vulnerable. We treat them gently.

So, what would happen if we saw every person that way? What if we viewed everyone person as a child – not the screaming, crying kind, but a child of God? What if we saw an aggressive, abusive person as a child that had been attacked at some point in their lives and was simply responding out of that hurt, as someone who was fragile and vulnerable? We all have our wounds that still cause pain and negatively influence how we live our lives and interaction with others, whether we're aware of them or not. The Greek word for "gentleness" is "praos," which is also used in the Bible to describe ointment that takes the sting out of a wound. What if we sought to live our lives as the ointment for other people's pain? To put it another way, how would our world change for the better if we approached our "enemies" with chopsticks rather than with knives?

One of the acts of gentleness Jesus encourages in us is to pray for our enemies. That might be a good place to start. If we struggle with being gentle with people who aren't gentle with us, we can pray for them. But Jesus doesn't call us to pray for our enemies in order to change them. He does it in order to change us, to soften our edges, to see them as people worthy of being prayed for, as human as deeply flawed and infinitely worthy as we are. So, if you struggle with being gentle, prayer is a good place to start.

Another nudge of guidance the Bible gives us comes once again from Paul, who says in chapter four of Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." There are several ways to interpret this exhortation, but I choose to read it like this. The Lord is near, therefore let your gentleness be known. How does it change our interactions if we envision that Christ is watching us? I don't mean in a punitive or micro-managing kind of way, like Jesus is seeing if we pass the gentleness test. Because the Bible tells us that where two or three are gathered, Jesus is there with us, then each encounter we have with another person, either virtually or in reality, the Lord is near. I know I might reword an email or a Facebook post if I knew that what I was about to say was being said in the presence of Jesus.

We have power. By giving us free will, God gave us power over our interactions, our words, our thoughts. We get to choose whether we bind or wound, whether we lash out or stitch up, whether we provide ointment or create a scar. Gentleness is not about impotence or being a doormat; it's about controlling our power, exercising the strength to be tender. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus offers the invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. For I am gentle and humble in heart." Gentleness may not be a virtue our world values, but it's a virtue our world needs. There is so much pain out there. The last thing we want to do is add to it. Instead, let us be "praos," the ointment that brings healing to the wounds around us. "Let your gentleness be known. The Lord is near."