Risk Gentleness and Self-Control

August 30, 2020

Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 4:1-6

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 It has been another difficult week in our nation, hasn’t it. From Hurricane Laura that wreaked havoc in Louisiana to yet another shooting and riots – this time in Wisconsin, to schools opening and schools closing, and COVID continuing -- and all of this in addition to the individual challenges we are facing - it’s been hard. I confess that my emotions have run the gamut this week from wanting to find a way to make a difference, to compassion fatigue, to perhaps the most dangerous place of all – to resignation and discouragement that despite our efforts things will not change. I’m finding that all of this is making me short-tempered and prone to lashing out in ways that I never would usually. Has anyone else been in these places with me?

 This morning we are concluding our series on the fruit of the spirit by looking at gentleness and self-control – they are so closely tied to each other that we are going to take them together. Not surprisingly, these last two qualities, and a review of the fruit as a whole, have a great deal to say to us today as we continue to face these personal and national challenges.

 As with most of the other fruits, gentleness and self-control are qualities that can seem counter-cultural to us. Especially when we learn that gentleness can also be translated as meekness or humility. The first thing I want to us understand today is that gentleness does not equal weakness. Moses was commended as the meekest man on earth in the book of Numbers. Jesus described His own disposition as meek when he said in Matthew, “I am gentle and lowly in heart.” Because this word is used of Moses and Jesus, it is clear that meekness is not weakness.  It is controlled strength and courage, coupled with kindness.” Titus 3:2 tells us that as Christians we are to be “gentle, showing all humility to everyone.”

The word for gentleness or meekness in Galatians 5 is the same word we find the Beautitudes in Matthew 5:5 – where we read, “blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth”. In all of these instances, the word meek is the opposite of haughty, boastful or full of wrath. Aristotle gave us a classic definition when he defined gentleness or meekness as halfway between excessive anger and indifference.4  Someone with this quality can bear hardship or loss with tranquility. I admit, that’s the balance I need to find.

 When the Spirit is producing gentleness or meekness in our lives, we are controlled even in difficult circumstances. Rather than flying into a rage or throwing a tantrum, we are able to keep our emotions and temper under control. If we find ourselves in a situation that we fiercely believe is wrong, we are able to wait for the appropriate moment to speak.

I hope you are beginning to see why gentleness and self-control are so closely related. It is almost impossible to have one without the other. Self-control is the virtue of one who masters his or her desires and passions. However, there is a caveat here. We translate the Greek word ***self***-control, but the word for "self" does not actually appear. The Greek word is derived from the word "strength" (*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary*).  The translation in Galatians 5 literally means "in-strength" or "strength within."  "Self-control" gives the wrong impression because it is not the "self" that gives this control.

 Many of us who struggle with temptations soon realize that the "self" cannot provide this control. If you are familiar with 12 step programs like AA – what is the first step? It is to realize that we are powerless or -- we do not have self-control over -- whatever it is that we are struggling with. Seen in this way, "self-control" is futile. What we need instead is "*Spirit*-control," which is the very point of the passage in Galatians 5.

### This is why in 12 step programs, the second step is coming to believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us, and the third step is making a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand God.

###  As 12 step folks are acutely aware, we cannot do this alone, but the good news is that we don’t have to. This is the fruit that God builds into our lives. In Ephesians, Paul reminds us that God builds the fruit of the spirit in us for a purpose, so that we may lead lives worthy of the calling to which we have been called, 2with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. God builds these fruits into our lives so that during weeks like these, we will not grow weary and lose heart.

###  When we began this series, we talked about how risking the fruit of the spirit would likely cost us something, that we might have to dig out some weeds to make room for the fruit of the spirit to grow, that the thorns on those weeds might make us feel prickly on occasion.

###  So I’m going to ask you to take a moment for personal self-reflection. Do you routinely respond to troubling situations with gentleness and the inner-strength that comes from giving our lives over to God? Or do you find that you are often a contributor to a heated and potentially explosive atmosphere? Does your presence bring peace into the midst of a conflict? When others say or do something that could offend you, do you quickly retort with a harsh answer, or do you allow the spirit to help you control your emotions and temper until the appropriate time to speak?

###  One of the places that many people are struggling with gentleness and self-control these days is in the political arena. You may be getting prickly already – last week the preacher talked about money and this week she’s talking about politics – don’t worry sex is not on the agenda – but I promise to be non-partisan here.

###  Unfortunately, the reality is that almost everything has become political lately hasn’t it? And our discourse about everything from COVID-19 to education to the economy has become highly polarized and divisive. Last week, BGAV sponsored a webinar entitled, “Revolutionary Civility,” led by Jim Baucom, pastor of Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, VA. He shared in his opening remarks that there are two men who sit on the same pew in his church and who fellowship together regularly. One served in President Obama’s cabinet and one currently serves in President Trump’s. I hoped that if anyone could help us learn to talk about the many important issues facing us with civility – with gentleness and self control, he could, and I was not disappointed.

###  Dr. Baucom began by acknowledging the complexity of the time we are living in and how our brains are just not wired to hold the many things we are dealing with in tension. To help relieve that tension we do one of two things he said: we tend to discard information that we can’t process – for example if we hear something that we disagree with – instead of thinking about it and considering it, we just instantly discard it. The other thing that we do is we only expose ourselves to sources of information that we already agree with. The internet does this for us once it learns our search patterns. But we also self-select which news channels we watch and whose Twitter feeds we follow. Eventually we become conditioned to think that only our position can be correct and that “the other group” must be wrong or immoral. The really unfortunate thing about this, Baucom asserts, is that the frame of reference that nearly everyone is using these days – to look at all of life - is a political one. He cited a long term Pew research study that has mapped our increasing polarization as a nation into isolated red and blue camps over the last three decades.

###  Jim was quick to remind the pastors on the webinar that as Christians we are to be shaped by the Word, not by the world. He reminded us of Vance Havner’s famous quote, “We are not citizens of earth trying to get to heaven, rather we are citizens of heaven, making our way through this world. We are certainly in the world, but we are not to be of it. Scripture and our faith should be the lens through which we view everything. So what does it mean to be shaped by the Word and what does that have to do with gentleness and self-control?

###  For me, that means first and foremost remembering that all people, every one of us – and every one we consider to be “them,” is created in the image of God. One day recently when I was particularly discouraged about whether I was making any difference in the world at all, a verse popped into my head, “whatever do for the least of these, your brothers and sisters, you do unto me.” It was a good reminder for me that everyone I meet is a child of God, and this is helping me to be gentle and spirit-controlled

###  Another thing that helps me is remembering that I don’t know what burdens others are carrying. As we talked about at the beginning of the message, there is so much weighing us down right now, many of us are barely hanging on. On days when I feel like that, it is gentleness and kindness that I need from others, not their anger. And that’s what I need to offer others in return. One suggestion that I try to apply is before I speak ask I ask myself three questions about what I intend to say: 1. Is it true, 2. Is it necessary, and 3. Is it kind?

###  Again, does this mean that we are weak and let people run all over us? Of course not. As Christians, it is our duty to stand for truth, and to speak truth to power when that becomes necessary. Even in the early days of the church, there were times when it was impossible to be loyal to God and to Rome. No matter where you fall on the political spectrum, there are lots of things in our country that we can and need to do better, and as Christians we need to help give shape to a better nation and a better world. But we need to do that in ways honor Christ and bear witness to the fruit of the spirit that God is cultivating within us – in ways that show we are oriented by the Word and not the world. After all, who will be open to our witness and want to follow Christ if we are no different in our speech and actions than those who do not profess him?

###  As we seek to engage in the issues of our time with Revolutionary Civility this election season, Jim Baucom recommends three things:

### First he suggests that we be Informed but not Entangled. Colossians 2:8 reminds us Watch out for people who try to dazzle you – or entangle you - with big words and intellectual double-talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything. They spread their ideas through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings. But that’s not the way of Christ.

### Be informed but not entangled.

### Second, be Engaged but not Enraged. Proverbs 15 reminds us A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly. ... The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit. Be engaged – but as a faithful, non-anxious presence.

### Finally, Baucom encourages us to be Discerning, not Demeaning. We do not raise ourselves up, or raise up our candidate and our party’s ideals, by demeaning others. Recently one of my nephews put up a post on Facebook that stated in order to level the playing field in the presidential debates, the Republicans should send the president’s 14 year old son Barron – but that even that Vice President Biden would lose. One of our neighbors has a yard sign that is very demeaning to President Trump. Although we might find the posts and signs that we agree with to be amusing, they do nothing to contribute to the type of civil discourse we need to help us be discerning about the next steps for our nation. In our conversations, in our social media posts, in our front yards, we can ask ourselves, Is it true, is it necessary, is it kind?

###  This is hard work friends. It’s so much easier to get caught up in angry rhetoric and to lash out in retaliation isn’t it? Social media and our inflammatory 24 hr. news cycle keep feeding the beast. But, as Galatians 5 reminds us, that doesn’t mean we become passive or that we don’t keep modeling a far better way.

 As we close out our sermon series, I invite us to hear this excerpt from Galatians 5 one more time. I’m reading from the Message:

1 -Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.

**13-15**Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that’s how freedom grows. For everything we know about God’s Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That’s an act of true freedom.

**16-18**My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God’s Spirit. Then you won’t feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day.

**22-23**But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in our hearts, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

**25-26**Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.

Friends, may we continue to allow the spirit to grow all of the fruit in our lives, and as a result, may we live lives worthy of our calling. Amen.