

Choosing Gentleness

A gentle spirit gives the world a taste of the presence of Jesus.

By Gary L. Thomas

I checked the car seat buckle for the third time. Allison, our firstborn, was 36 hours old, and I was determined that she'd live for at least another 80 years.

The car seat was placed in the exact middle of the backseat. Then I placed rolled-up towels around Allison's body, just in case. I think a nuclear missile could have broadsided us, and Allison still would have had a 50/50 chance of survival.

We lived about three miles from the hospital, but I drove so slowly and cautiously that it took almost 20 minutes to get home. No telling how slippery the road might be on a perfectly dry, sunny, spring day. This was my first child, and nothing was going to harm her.

Ten years later, I stand in a pool and hurl my children into the water, throwing them as high as I can. After more than a decade of childrearing, you realize kids aren't quite as fragile as they first appear. But I'll never forget the gentleness with which I treated our firstborn.

This is the same gentleness that Paul commands us to have toward others. He says that as apostles—as living examples of the character of Christ—"we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children" (1 Thes. 2:7).

Jonathan Edwards suggests gentleness "may well be called the Christian spirit. It is the distinguishing disposition in the hearts of Christians to be identified as Christians . . . All who are truly godly and are real disciples of Christ have a gentle spirit in them."

How can we become gentle in a brutal world?

The Taskmaster

"Gary, you're a lazy bum."

The person speaking was me. It was 10 p.m., and I'd just spent 30 minutes watching television. "What an absolute waste of time," I muttered to myself. "You have a serious discipline problem."

By the time I reached the top of the stairs, an inward nudge had arrested me. I was led to reconsider my day. I'd spent twelve hours at work, two hours commuting, and when I got home, even though I was tired, I'd agreed to play Chutes and Ladders with my children. Most parents know that Chutes and Ladders was designed as a cruel punishment for the well-meaning but gullible parents who buy it:

"Now, Daddy, do I go up the slide?"

"No, you go down the slide and up the ladder."

It can try a parent's patience like nothing else, especially at the end of a long day.

After we finished playing the game, I put the kids to bed and spent some time talking to my wife, Lisa.

As I reevaluated my day, I saw that 30 minutes of watching television didn't erase a day's worth of service. In fact, I had made many good choices. Why was I so harsh with myself?

I don't think I'm an exception. Mentally, many of us flagellate ourselves over failure and embarrassments. Where does this self-attacking attitude come from?

A harsh view of God leads us to be brutal with ourselves and demanding with others. Many of us look upon God as sort of a celestial Mark Twain—brilliant, but not easy to work for. After reviewing the work of one proofreader, Twain called upon the full armament of his wit to reduce the poor fellow to a shrunken heap: "The man was an idiot," he said. "And not only was he an idiot, but he was blind. And not only was he blind, he was partly dead."

Some people think God treats us this way, ruthlessly demanding perfection and letting us have it whenever we fall short. We believe that anything less than perfection will be met with at least a good, sharp kick, or maybe even a serious disease, such as cancer.

How do *you* view God?

To get on the path of gentleness, we need to develop a better understanding of the depths of our Lord's gentleness.

The Gentle God

Though Jesus gave Himself a number of figurative titles (such as the Good Shepherd), when it came to actually describing His character with specific virtues, there are very few self-portraits. This means the descriptions He does give are particularly important. When Jesus describes Himself in Matthew 11:29, gentleness tops the list: "I am gentle and humble in heart."

Even before Jesus came, the prophets had predicted that the Messiah would be known for His gentleness: "See, your king comes to you . . . gentle and riding on a donkey" (Zech. 9:9). Isaiah 42:3 foretold that the Christ would not break a "bruised reed" or snuff out a "smoldering wick." Even at its best, a reed is weak, hollow, and fragile. A bruised reed depicts a spirit that is hanging on by a few threads. A smoldering wick depicts a spirit in which life and hope have all but vanished. Jesus, sent to reveal the nature of our Creator, was clothed in gentleness. This virtue allowed Him to enter into the lives of broken, hurting people.

I've met many people like that, who feel as if one more difficulty will surely cause them to fall apart. Lonely, distant marriages; the ache of a child in rebellion; the seeming impossibility of ever making enough money to pay half the bills; the pervasive silence of God; the scars of past humiliation; two dozen people's worth of ailments in one body—the causes of bruised reeds are endless. In businesses and churches, in stores and shopping malls, and even in ballparks, you'll see bruised reeds and smoldering wicks.

Do you ever feel as if you are "just making it"? If so, you may know the offensiveness of ungentle Christians who march onto the scene and make an already difficult situation intolerable. The guy who says, "Get over it." Or the woman who glibly comments: "Don't worry; Jesus took your baby to be with Him in heaven. You're young; you can have another one." Or the legalist who charges, "Obviously, you wouldn't act like that if you loved the Lord. Are you sure you're saved?"

These people come with verbal saws to remove spiritual slivers. That's not an accurate depiction of Jesus. He is the one who can touch you without breaking you. Jesus can gently nurse you back to spiritual health: "I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29). Jesus wants to give us this same capacity for compassion.

The Gentle Christian

The Bible is clear that those who call Christ their master will display gentleness. Phil. 4:5 tells us, "Let your gentleness be evident to all." Col. 3:12 adds, "Clothe yourselves with . . . gentleness." Paul is even more direct in 1 Tim. 6:11: "But you, man of God . . . pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and *gentleness*" (emphasis mine).

Peter urged us to answer nonbelievers with "gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). That means even the enemies of Christ, those who oppose Him and ridicule His followers, are to be treated with gentleness. In this, Peter suggests that gentleness *is not a bonus we give to the deserving; it is a debt we owe to all.*

Even fallen Christians can be won back by gentleness. Paul counsels in Galatians 6:1: "If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." Though someone has brought shame on the name of Christ, we're urged to maintain a gentle spirit.

Paul even urges us to treat those who oppose us with gentleness, saying of a Christian leader, “Those who oppose him he must gently instruct” (2 Tim. 2:25).

The legalist would protest, “They don’t deserve to be treated respectfully,” but this misses the point. The gospel isn’t about winning an argument; it’s about reconciling people to God and to each other. Brutish force doesn’t reconcile, it divides. Legalistic demands don’t invite, they alienate. Grace and gentleness build bridges.

We can’t shout people into righteousness. In fact, it has been my experience that those Christians who shout the loudest often have the most guilt-ridden consciences. What they need more than anything else is to be overwhelmed with the reality of the gentle God who loves them.

Since Paul urges Timothy to pursue gentleness, it must be possible to acquire this virtue in our own lives. Let’s look at how that might take place.

Becoming Gentle People

I was working on my car—always a frustrating experience for a mechanical klutz like me—and my youngest was keeping me company. As she inspected my tools, she opened my socket set. It was upside down. Sixty-four sockets rolled onto the sidewalk.

“Oh, Kelsey,” I said. I didn’t yell or even raise my voice. But she is so sensitive that just the tone was enough to elicit a pained expression. She started to walk toward the house, but I called after her.

“Kelsey?”

She turned.

“You didn’t mean to do that. I’m not angry at you. It’s all right.”

Kelsey broke down, ran back to me, and buried her weeping face in my shoulder. Her actions reminded me of how easily people in this world are wounded. How delicate are the souls we encounter every day. We often miss this because, on the exterior, everybody looks fine. But inside, many are bruised reeds just waiting to topple over. It’s no wonder that God wants to give us the spirit of gentleness.

Why is it that gentleness makes us think weakness, when gentleness takes incredible inner strength, self-control, and resilience? On one occasion, I was trying to sell a car. I parked it in the outskirts of a shopping-mall parking lot with a “For Sale” sign taped to the windows. Overnight, it was towed. I contacted mall security, and they said they hadn’t requested any towing. But I found out that a towing company had a contract. If they were experiencing a slow night, they could go “shopping” for cars to pick up.

It had been a stressful week, and I was already in a bad mood. And when I arrived at the towing office, things went from bad to worse. The personnel were abominable. The manager’s wall was covered with photos of naked women. I was convinced this outfit was incapable of making an honest living as tow-truck operators and had instead become industrial vultures who preyed on honest people.

I lost my temper in their office. I let them know exactly what I thought. And I was wrong. My outburst was a sign of weakness. Anger has a place in the Christian life, as does confrontation. But gentleness has a far bigger role to play than anger. Gentleness is much more powerful than the human failings of temper, anger, and hatred.

In Scripture, gentleness is frequently placed in opposition to words such as harsh, violent, unrelenting, strict, and severe. Gentleness means understanding human frailty. It’s a willingness to support, help, teach, and counsel with patience, until the other person becomes strong and mature.

Gentleness also means the application of grace. Since grace is “unmerited favor,” the true definition of gentleness is the application of unmerited favor. This means no one has to earn my gentleness.

A towing company that cheats people is still best treated gently. My strong voice didn't challenge them; I'm sure it hardened them. Had I been more mature, I might have been able to reason with them. As it was, I was selfish. I was upset at having to pay \$90 for a three-mile towing job. I felt cheated, angry, and vengeful, and closed any possible door of reasoning.

Perhaps God had ordained my car to be towed for me to enter an environment and group of people in need of a positive influence. Instead of judging the manager, maybe I could have reached out and shared the gospel with him. Instead, I spewed my human weakness all over. I wouldn't be surprised if the manager took the stress out on his kids that evening. My response may have brought additional grief into this man's family.

How can we cultivate the gentleness we need in such trying situations?

Remember the gentleness of Christ. The first step in becoming gentle is being overwhelmed by the gentleness with which God has treated us. I try to remind myself that I need to treat others as God has treated me. Gentleness doesn't call us to ignore people's failings; God doesn't ignore mine. But it does call me to respond in a particular way. The difference is in methodology—how sin and weakness are confronted and handled, not whether they will be handled.

We are completely undeserving, dead in our sins, still failing on a daily basis, yet God doesn't write us off. He's still there, still forgiving, still loving, still nurturing. Accept this gentleness for yourself. If you find this to be a difficult exercise, read slowly and thoughtfully over Matthew 11:28–30; Matthew 21:5; and 2 Cor. 10:1. Let these passages feed your spirit and redirect your thinking so that you can understand the nature of the God who loves you.

Show gentleness to yourself. It is painful to hear people berating themselves for stupid things they did years ago. Maybe you did make a bad business investment, but how did you expect to learn a lesson? Are we supposed to be born financially brilliant? Maybe you did fail morally, but will you punish yourself for the rest of your life?

The spiritual life is one of learning and growing, and God, more than anyone else, understands this. Do we honestly think God expects us to go from eager pagan to Francis of Assisi in two weeks? This is not an apology for sin, but merely a plea for a realistic view of living.

I've made some stupid choices in my life. I've hurt people deeply. I've betrayed my calling. I've brought shame on the name of Christ. I can't erase what has happened. But this is the genius of gentleness: Even where my wrong is clearly evident, gentleness calls me to apply *unmerited favor* to myself, based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Show gentleness to others. Let's remind ourselves of some spiritual truths: Nobody, apart from God, is perfect. Your spouse will fail you. Your children will disappoint you. Your pastor won't meet your expectations. The time will come, therefore, when you will have a legitimate gripe. You will be right, and they will be wrong. This is the Crossroads of gentleness. Which path will you take? Condemnation and censure or the application of unmerited favor? Before you make that decision, remind yourself of how God has treated you.

Life is tough. We can choose to live our lives disappointed with everyone around us, or we can be armed with the virtue of gentleness and enter into the blessing of authentic relationship.

It's easier to respond with gentleness when we realize that people are being ground down all the time by the stuff of living. One time I took great offense when a woman I know snapped at me. I'd done nothing to provoke her. Later I learned that, due to financial difficulties, she and her husband had recently lost their home, and it looked as if they would lose their car.

It wasn't right for her to take her tension out on me, but I just happened to be there. As a Christian brother, I could absorb that frustration as a gift to her and to the gentle God who has treated me with unbelievable grace.

When a child comes home from school, seemingly bent on being deliberately difficult; when a spouse comes home from work and is being unfairly short tempered; when a coworker snaps, I

pause, pray, and consider: “What is this all about? What is really going on here?” And then, with self-control and grace, I can respond gently.

We can force people to do many things. And in forcing, we can break their spirit a little more or even drive them away from us altogether. The alternative is to draw them to us in the spirit of Christ—by the virtue of gentleness, to open their hearts to correction, learning, and growth. Perhaps most important, they can experience Christ in us.

Gentleness simply makes life far more pleasant. Gentle living is blessed living. It’s soothing, refreshing, bathing people in the presence of Christ. No wonder Edwards calls it “the Christian spirit.” What else more accurately paints a picture of our Lord? What other virtue so radically gives us our lives back from the frivolous judgments and misdirected angers of the world?