

## Shaped by the Spirit (Part 8): Gentleness

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

Read **Galatians 5:12-26**

### 1. The Violent Bear It Away

Jesus said, in Matthew 11:12 that <sup>12</sup>“From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.” And since Jesus’ times Christians have still been prone to using violence and force to advance the kingdom.

This is inconsistent with God’s way of growing things in Jesus, which is gentle. God’s kingdom is a kingdom of love and love cannot be forced.

*Gentleness* is when we stop using force to get our way and start making space for genuine love.

### 2. Gentleness is Power Under Control

Gandalf is Tolkien’s commentary on power. He rarely looks or acts powerful, but when he faces something dire, he shows his true power. That’s why he said to Bilbo “do not take me for some conjurer of cheap tricks.”

Jesus has a similar moment in Matthew 26:52, after one of his disciples cuts off the ear of a man arresting Jesus, He says: “Put your sword back in its place...for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. <sup>53</sup>Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels [approx. 36,000-72,000]? <sup>54</sup>But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”

Jesus could have taken things with violence and force, but he didn’t. Unlike warmongering dictators who ride into town in tanks, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. He fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah:

“Say to Daughter Zion,  
‘See, your king comes to you,  
*gentle* and riding on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zech. 9:9 in Matthew 21:5

Jesus did not use force, but instead he demonstrated what Perry Penny—former RCMP officer—calls gentleness: *power under control*. He had the power to destroy and to force but didn't use it.

### **3. God is a Gentleman: Love Cannot Be Forced**

Why didn't He use force? Because love cannot be forced.

Dallas Willard in His book on apologetics called *The Allure of Gentleness* says if you read between the lines "...God's purpose within human history...is to create for himself a living abode—a community of free, conscious, living beings."<sup>2</sup>

God's purpose is to have people freely follow Him in love. Because of that, He won't use force to make us do things.

This is best demonstrated in Mark 5:1-20. Jesus is presented as someone going to conquer a new land. He has a confrontation with a 'legion' of demons—purposeful Roman military language. He sends them into pigs 'charging' down the hill to their death.

But the townspeople ask Him to go. And guess what, He does.

Jesus is Lord is a lift from Roman propaganda for Caesar. If Caesar was asked to leave after winning his first battle, he'd crucify half the town. He'd force the rest to worship him.

But God's kingdom is a kingdom of love and freedom where love cannot be forced.

### **4. Stop Using Force to Get Our Way**

We grow in gentleness by learning to stop using force to get our way.

Some Christian leaders act like the gifts of the Spirit contradict the fruit of the Spirit. Like they can be mean or cutthroat or forceful because they are gifted to lead. But the gifts of the Spirit do not contradict the fruit. The gifts exist to produce the fruit.

Paul didn't do his ministry that way. One church actually called him too 'timid': By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am "timid" when face to face with you, but "bold" toward you when away!" (2 Corinthians 10:1).

Paul reasoned with the people he led, he didn't burn anybody at the stake or beat or whip anybody.

Most people who resort to using shame, fear, aggression, or manipulation to get people to do things are trying to get their way, not God's way.

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<sup>2</sup> Willard, *The Allure of Gentleness*, 122.

This doesn't mean we become emotionless, or that we don't stand up for ourselves and express things firmly. Being full of the Spirit is not being a Zen master or Jedi knight.

But it means we do not use force, in any form, to get our way. We respect the God given freedom of others.

Paul wrote to his mentee, Timothy: "And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be *gently* instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth..." (2 Timothy 2:24-45, emphasis added)

When things get heated, that can be hard to do. Biblical scholar Chris Wright once said: "...gentleness is the ability to endure [hostility and criticism] without *aggression*."<sup>3</sup> When we are faced with aggression, sometimes the most powerful thing we can do is absorb it without throwing it back.

## 5. The Gentle Will Inherit the Earth

But that approach, well, it sounds scary, doesn't it? We believe in our world that the violent—those who are forceful—really do bear it away. They raid the kingdom.

Eugene Peterson defines gentleness: "*gentleness*, the freedom to abjure from promethean assaults on the recalcitrant world and to be instead salt and light and leaven."<sup>4</sup> He says we are *free* from forcing the world to be our way. *Free* from what we want.

What give us that freedom?

Jesus said: "Blessed are the meek [*praus*=gentle] for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5)

When studying a Greek word in the New Testament, you don't just want to know what it meant in Greek. You want to know how it was used to translate Hebrew words in the Old Testament. Because the authors of the New Testament were culturally Jewish. The Greek word for gentle is '*praus*' and it's used to translate the Hebrew *anaw* or *ani*. *Anaw* means 'one bent down like a slave' and *Ani* means literally 'without property'. Often, they were translated poor and meek, but we could use another word: the vulnerable.

Many throughout history have chosen vulnerability—the cross-bearing way of Jesus—over fighting back. Because their trust was in the promise of Jesus that the gentle would inherit the earth.

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit*, 127

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 165-166.