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Date: November 25, 2018

Title: Fruit of the Spirit Series – 9. Gentleness: Tough & Tender

Text: Philippians 4:5

Philippians 4:5 – *“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”* Today we are looking at the 8th characteristic listed in our study on the Fruit of the Spirit. Our key verses for the series are found in Galatians 5:22-23. The NIV reads – *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, GENTLENESS and self-control...”* The KJV reads – *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, MEEKNESS, temperance...”* How many of you used the word MEEKNESS in your normal conversation this week? It’s not a typical word that spills from our lips, is it?

Can anyone tell me the best year in movies? That is a very subjective question, but when I googled it earlier this week, I found an article entitled – *The Best Year in Movies: The Final Results*. This article tagged 1939 as the best year for movies. I thought it interesting that the best year in movies was 79 years ago. Anyone brave enough or smart enough or OLD enough to name 3 movies from 1939? *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Gone with the Wind and The Wizard of Oz*. In *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy and her friends are finally given an audience with the film’s namesake, he bellows out, “I am Oz, the great and powerful! Who are you?” Dorothy – Judy Garland – softly answers, “I am Dorothy, the small and the meek.” But she doesn’t always seem quite so meek, does she? At least, not in the way that many define meekness. In the opening segment she stands up to mean Mrs. Gulch. And then later she stands up to the Wicked Witch of the West. And she even stands up to the Wizard himself. She may be meek, but she’s certainly NOT weak. She’s no doormat, no damsel in distress. She’s strong and courageous, without being a bully about it. She truly is meek – according to the actual definition of the word.

So today we look at meekness or gentleness. How many GENTLE-men do we have here today? (If not, we pray you’ll leave here one.) We’ve been looking at nine qualities that we are called to cultivate as we live a Spirit-empowered life, and today we come to the quality that in some older Bible versions is translated MEEKNESS. This is a word that many don’t properly understand, because they confuse meekness with weakness. They think a meek person to be passive, spineless, unable to stand up for themselves or others. Well, that’s NOT what meekness is. Many Bible versions today translate this word GENTLENESS. Gentleness may be easier for us to understand, but let’s not confuse being gentle with being soft. We will discover today that this quality of meekness or gentleness refers to a STRENGTH OF CHARACTER that has nothing to do with being a wimp. Instead, meekness is all about KNOWING WHEN to be tough and when to be tender. The word that is translated meek (or gentle) in the New Testament is a word that’s not so easily translated into English. The word is “proates,” and Aristotle defined this quality as the perfect middle between two extremes. For example, it’s the middle ground between the person who takes offense at every little thing, and the person who doesn’t take offense at anything. Aristotle defined “proates” – meekness – as the person who knows when to be angry at the right time, and is never angry at the wrong time. The word is related in root to the adjective “praus,” which is used to describe an animal who had been tamed and properly trained to submit to a master. Like a horse, for example. There’s nothing weak about a horse. A horse can often pull 3 times its own weight – upwards of 2500 pounds! It’s a powerful animal, but that power is under control. When someone describes a horse as being gentle, we know that it doesn’t mean that the horse is weak or helpless. He is still powerful, but it is a controlled power. This is the quality that we are looking for in the Spirit-filled life. Jesus says very clearly in speaking of Himself, *“Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart: and you shall find rest unto your souls”* (Matthew 11:28-29, KJV). “I am meek (gentle),” He says. Jesus was meek, he was gentle, but he was NEVER weak or passive. He stood up to the merchants in the temple, driving them out of the courtyard with a whip. He stood up to the angry mob that wanted to put to death the woman caught in adultery. He stood up to the Pharisees over and over again, calling out their hypocrisy. He was NOT weak, but He WAS meek. He gently restored the woman caught in adultery. He embraced those whom society had discarded. He showed compassion to those whose lives were filled with failure. He KNEW when to be tough, AND He KNEW when to be tender. And so today we will look at three phrases that challenge us to model this tough-AND-tender quality of meekness.

1. A Quiet Approach. When you consider how Jesus came into the world, compared with how he COULD have come into the world, you get a glimpse into His humble, gentle nature. After all, JESUS was and is the King of kings and the Lord of

lords. He could have announced His arrival to royalty. He could have called all the armies to kneel in submission to Him. He could have made it a spectacular event. Instead, He was born in a STABLE, to working class parents, and His birth was declared to a small group of POOR, SHEPHERD BOYS working the night shift. There was no real fanfare. And that was how He lived His life. How many times do you read in the gospels, whenever Jesus healed someone, that He said, in effect, "Don't tell anyone about this. Keep this to yourself." Jesus wasn't about self-promotion or fanfare. The week before His crucifixion, He entered the gates of Jerusalem – we call it the Triumphal Entry – and though some in the crowd waved palm branches and shouted "Hosanna" to celebrate His presence, it was an UNDERPLAYED moment when you consider who He REALLY was, and what He came to do. Matthew writes, "*Say to the daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, GENTLE and riding on a donkey'*" (Matthew 21:5). In ancient days, when a king intent on WAR entered a city, he entered on HORSEBACK. When a king entered intent on PEACE, he rode on a DONKEY. There was nothing weak about Jesus. He cast out devils, stilled the raging storm, and raised the dead back to life. But, He was not the type to be the aggressor, or to come looking for a fight. He came, first, in PEACE, GENTLE and riding on a donkey. We would do well to live the same way. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul gives us a perfect description of meekness, though he doesn't use the word. "*Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody*" (vs. 11). A quiet life – minding your own business – doing your job with excellence – striving to earn respect rather than merely capture attention. THIS is the first step in modeling the quality of meekness: We seek to live a lie without fanfare. We don't call unnecessary attention to ourselves. In meekness, we take a quiet approach to life.

2. A Teachable Spirit. I don't know where I heard the statement, but I've said it fairly often – Opinions are like armpits, we ALL have them and they ALL stink. That's not quite accurate. I should clarify. We do ALL have armpits and we do ALL have opinions, BUT NOT EVERY opinion stinks. I'm rather sure that people have always been given to sharing their opinion, but today's social media tends to expose us to more opinion than we can ever deal with. It used to be that we all had one or two friends in our circle who knew everything there is to know about everything and couldn't keep their thoughts and ideas to themselves, SO we learned how to tune them out OR maybe we avoid them altogether. NOW it's all but impossible to avoid the opinions of others. That in itself isn't necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps there's nothing wrong with having an opinion or expressing an opinion. The problem lies in the know-it-all attitude that drives so much of what is being said. "There is only ONE right way to look at this, and it just happens to be MY way, and I am here to set everyone straight." More than ever we live today with an "us and them" mentality. In other words: We're the good guys and they're the bad guys. If you're NOT one of us, you're evil in every sense of the word. That mentality exists today, and it is the opposite of Biblical meekness. We saw an example of meekness demonstrated not so long ago at the many memorials of Senator John McCain. When Mr. McCain was running for president, just weeks away from the election, he was speaking at a town hall filled with supporters, and in response to some of the comments from the crowd, he said this about Barack Obama: "He's a decent family man ... who I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues ... He's a person that you do not have to be scared of as president of the United States." (By the way, his measured response did not go over well with those in attendance.) Anyone who knew John McCain knew that there was nothing weak or timid about him. When he was a prisoner of war, he was offered an early release because of family connections he had at high levels in the military. However, he refused the offer. He said, in effect, "I'm not leaving until we all leave." That showed a strength of character that few can imagine, let alone imitate. He was tough, and yet, he generally approached public service with a tender attitude of humility. Here's what I'm saying. When it comes to politics, or theology, or any debatable topic, the meek person will approach the matter with a humble, gentle, teachable spirit. It's the fine balance – the middle ground – between being able to say, "I stand by my convictions" while saying, "I don't know everything there is to know. The Book of James tells us to ... "*humbly accept the word planted in you...*" (James 1:21). The King James Version says ... "*receive with meekness the engrafted word...*" He's talking about having a teachable spirit. You can't be a know-it-all and demonstrate Biblical gentleness at the same time. Whatever your dearly held opinion might be, leave a little room for humility. Leave a little room for a teachable spirit.

3. A Considerate Attitude. A few years ago now a large church in Seattle – and by "large," I mean about 12,000 in weekly attendance – went through a leadership crisis that led to them shutting their doors. It was NOT the result of a sexual scandal or a financial scandal, as is too often the case. Instead, the crisis occurred because the climate among the leaders was anything BUT meek or gentle. The leadership had become so toxic, so negative, so critical and mean-spirited that the church simply couldn't survive. The ministry seemed to be modeled on fear, coercion, and intimidation, and it led to their implosion. I hate to see a church fold, but it may have been good that this one did, because there is no room in the kingdom of God for that kind of leadership. I say this cautiously, because I don't want to point a finger at anyone. But this

should be a wake-up call to leaders in every area. Being a leader should NEVER be synonymous with being a bully. When Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, he reminded them of his gentle approach to ministry. *"We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her children"* (1 Thessalonians 2:7). If you're a leader – especially in the church, but anywhere else as well – this is your example to follow. I've known spiritual leaders who fancied themselves as a boot camp drill sergeant or a no-nonsense prison warden – but that's NOT the example we've been called to emulate. Instead, Paul says that we should be *"like a mother caring for her children."* And Jesus says, *"For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:30). We model Biblical meekness when we treat others – especially those whom we are called to lead – with tender consideration. This is why Paul said, *"Let your gentleness be evident to all"* (Philippians 4:5). Recently I heard someone describe a seemingly hard-hearted leader this way: *"When you get to know him, you find out that he's really a nice guy."* This is a problem. People shouldn't have to *"get to know you"* to find out you're actually not as ruthless as you seem. If you truly are a person of character, you can let them see your gentle side up front. Now, if you're a leader – or a parent – you know that THERE ARE TIMES when you HAVE to be firm. It's knowing when to be tough. There are times when you have to turn up the heat and say things that the other person doesn't want to hear. It's necessary sometimes: We see it in Jesus and we see it in Paul. And, though it is necessary sometimes, we need to remember that it's not necessary ALL the time, or even MOST of the time. Our go-to attitude should be one of gentle consideration of the needs of others. An effective leader knows when to be tough, and when to be tender ... and prefers to be tender. This is why Paul said, *"...in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others"* (Philippians 2:3-4). Biblical meekness means that we demonstrate to others a considerate attitude.

Conclusion. Earlier I mentioned Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, how she stood up to mean Mrs. Gulch, and the Wicked Witch of the West, and even the Wizard himself – because she was nobody's punching bag. There was another character she stood up to, if you remember. It was the LION. When they first encountered him, he tried to bully and intimidate Dorothy, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man – roaring and challenging them to fight. (*"Put 'em up! Put 'em up!"*) But Dorothy was having none of that. She called him on his behavior and even socked him in the nose and made him cry. Of course, it wasn't hard to make him cry; he was a COWARDLY lion. But I don't know if you noticed or not, but after that initial confrontation, I don't think she was ever harsh with him again. She treated him, for the remainder of their journey, with tender affection – even when he displayed his cowardly tendencies. She continued to be gentle. Here's the Biblical pattern of meekness: You know when to be tough – You know when to be tender – and You really prefer to be tender. You demonstrate it through a quiet approach, a teachable spirit, and a considerate attitude. That's the power-under-control nature of this aspect of the fruit of the Spirit. Here's my challenge for you today – your homework assignment for the rest of your life: In every situation, make it your objective to let your gentleness be evident to all – those you LEAD, those you LOVE, those you LIVE WITH, those you WORK WITH, those you SERVE, those who SERVE YOU, those whom you encounter in every situation and circumstance throughout the day. Let the Holy Spirit do His work in your life, and allow your MEEKNESS – your GENTLE STRENGTH – to be seen by all.