

## Galatians 5 v 23 The fruit of the Spirit is gentleness

### Introduction

The meaning of words in English or any other language for that matter is constantly changing. You cannot read an older book from a previous century and simply assume that the author means what you might with a particular set of words in a sentence. Prior to the 1960s, a person using the word 'gay' to describe themselves was suggesting that they were of a cheerful disposition, in effect a generally bright and happy person. The other usage might be observed in a description of a wonderful display of colourful flowers in a garden or field as in 'a gay profusion of purple and ink sweet peas'; or this example in a post-World War Two text: 'it was quite a sight, after the war and four years of dreary austerity in England, to see girls whirling round the dance floor in pretty full-length evening dresses in gay colours.' My favour example is the change of meaning of the word 'Comfort' over the last millennia. There is the famous scene in the Bayeux tapestry concerning the invasion of England by William the Conqueror. They are at Hastings and the first part of the conflict with Harold's army has not gone well and many of his men want to quit and go home. The panel is entitled: 'Bishop Odo comforts his troops'. He has a mace and is using it to confront them and motivate them to turn round and take on Harold's forces once again. The word 'comfort' then had the idea of giving strength and was a very strong and forceful term. In the second encounter the Normans were victorious, Harold died and the future of southern Britain was significantly changed. By the early seventeenth century and the production of the King James Version of the Bible the translators chose to translate the Greek name for the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete –'the One called alongside') as 'the Comforter'. It had the idea of encouragement and a clear sense of direction in the advice being given, though all hints of the physical assertiveness of former centuries had long since disappeared from the meaning of this word. By the late twentieth century to comfort someone was 'a display of sympathy', 'a shoulder to cry on', so the NIV translators chose the word 'The Counsellor' for this term in John 16:7. We can have the same kind of issues with the word Paul uses here in Galatians 5 v 23 translated here as *gentleness* but sometimes rendered as *meekness*. It conveys a similar message to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:5: *Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth*. One of the most famous figures who rejected out of hand this quality was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. He had an image of the strong man who lives by his own rules and by force persuades others to fall into line with his vision of how the world should be. Adolf Hitler and his National Socialists adapted this vision to promote their Fascist agenda and eliminate the weaker or unfit people in concentration camps. Nietzsche was particularly critical of Christianity as its emphasis on meekness was crippling to the human heart and mind and hindered the evolution of humankind to its full potential. Yet as we look over the world today have the military adventures of the great powers achieved significant success in Afghanistan or the Middle East, for example? Have the Islamic extremists prevailed in the same region whether in its Sunni guise in Wahhabism or its Shia equivalent in Iran? In the short-term the answer may be a qualified 'yes', but it cannot succeed over the longer term. Conformity out of fear of reprisals will never be the same as acceptance of the validity of the principles behind such practices. The way of Jesus commended here by Paul is promoting character qualities that are a world apart from the violence and hatred that is engulfing much of the Middle East and parts of Africa and Asia at the present time. For the follower of Jesus *the fruit of the Spirit is gentleness*. How are you and I getting on in displaying this characteristic in our lives?

## **1. The use of this term in the Bible and the ancient world**

(a) **Gentleness in the ancient world** *Meekness* or *Gentleness* although not understood or approved by many people in the ancient world not unlike the present day, but there were others then as now who understood and welcomed the appropriateness of this attitude in interpersonal relations. In his work *The Laws* Plato illustrates the meaning of this word by referring to a doctor seeking to treat a little child who needs medical attention. He indicates that the doctor's manner ought to be calm and soothing in order to put the child at their ease. This word was used in the context of advice for calming down an angry person and in a medical context of the impact of an appropriate medicine to treat an ulcerous wound (These and subsequent examples unless otherwise identified are from William Barclay, *Flesh and Spirit*, pp. 112-115). Plato also used this word in teaching about general manners, courtesy and politeness as a core characteristic of civic society. Persian Emperor Cyrus was recognised as having great interpersonal skills. He was described as 'gentle and forgiving of human errors'. However, there are plenty of other people who lack this quality. The well-known society critic and public speaker in eighteenth-century England Dr Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was described in this way by the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds: The most light and airy dispute was with him a dispute in the arena. He fought on every occasion as if his whole reputation depended upon the victory of the minute, and he fought with all his weapons. If he was foiled in argument, he had recourse to abuse and rudeness. His friend James Boswell gave this reply to Johnson after he had described a night out in this way: 'Well, we had good talk'. Boswell replied: Yes sir, you tossed and gored several persons.' This word was also used to describe a horse or dog that had been trained to respond to its owner's commands. Aristotle defined this word as the perfect combination of strength and gentleness. It is clear that what is meant by this word was approved and recommended by some of the best educated people in the ancient world

(b) **Gentleness in the Old Testament** In the Old Testament there are only a small number of times where this word is used. In Psalm 45:4 in advice to a new monarch it states: *In your majesty ride forth victoriously on behalf of truth, humility [gentleness] and righteousness*. Even an absolute monarch in the biblical era was to retain a sense of perspective that they ruled under the authority of God and were accountable to Him. How they related to their subjects needed to be in a God-honouring manner. Psalm 90:10 is a reminder of the shortness of time and a need to retain a sense of perspective. We may be young and in vigorous health now, but by implication eventually *weakness overtake us* (LXX Psalm 90:10b); it is wise to be gentle in our years of strength as we would wish others later to be gentle with us in our later years. Psalm 147:6 states: *The Lord sustains the humble [gentle] but casts the wicked to the ground*. In our world too often it looks as though those who don't push themselves forward with vigour will lose out. Many of us will have witnessed people obtain posts after interviews ahead of better qualified people because they could offer a more charismatic or bold presentation of what they had to bring to the post –sometimes stretching the description of their experience and skills beyond a reasonable interpretation of what they had to offer! The Psalmist says that God will stand with those who seek to do things the right way. Psalm 25:9: *He guides the humble [gentle] in what is right and teaches them His way*. Psalm 149:4: *For the Lord takes delight in His people; He crowns the humble [gentle] with salvation*. Then possibly the best known reference in the Psalms for this word, (because of its citation by Jesus in Matthew 5:5), in Psalm 37:11: *But the meek [gentle] will inherit the earth and enjoy the abundance of peace*.

The fear for many good people, not just followers of Jesus, is that if I live this way then I might lose out in terms of my career or in some other context. The biblical response to such fears is clear. The kind of person you are is what matters most. God will honour those that honour Him by their gentle demeanour and gracious approach to inter-personal relations. In

the short-term there may be situations in which we may lose out, but over the longer-term we will be vindicated. One example from the Old Testament- Moses- will be reflected on to see how this works in practise.

(c) **Gentleness in the New Testament** There are quite a few uses of this word in the New Testament. In I Corinthians Paul challenges them on their desire to have strong powerful leaders –people whose ministry style is very different to his own. There are some significant pastoral problems that need to be addressed so he invites them to offer a view on how he should approach these difficulties in I Corinthians 4:21: *What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a **gentle spirit**?* He makes the same appeal in II Corinthians 10:1: *By the humility and **gentleness** of Christ, I appeal to you – I, Paul, who am ‘timid’ when face to face with you, but ‘bold’ towards you when away!* Paul had changed. As a young man he was the proverbial ‘bull in a china-shop’ in interpersonal relations, but he had learned as he got older that it was more about winning people than arguments and his older colleague Barnabas had been right after all. To the church at Ephesus Paul wrote: *Be completely humble **and gentle**; be patient, bearing with one another in love* (Ephesians 4:2). To the church at Colossae he wrote: *Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, **gentleness** and patience* (Col.3:12). To his young colleague Titus Paul wrote that it must be our considered approach: *to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and **always to be gentle towards everyone*** (Titus 3:2). For church leaders the apostle gave instructions as to how we are to respond when someone has erred in belief or behaviour. In II Timothy 2:24-25 it states: *And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. <sup>25</sup> Opponents must be **gently** instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.* There is a clear pattern to these verses of the kind of person a man or woman of God ought to aspire to be in their inter-personal relations. It is not just having the right words or doing the right thing; the manner by which we go about it is also vitally important. Am I, are you known for our gentleness in the way we speak to or relate with our brothers and sisters in Christ? If not –what will we seek to do to make the necessary changes? This is not unworkable theory, but God’s wisdom for our lives. Two brief biblical examples will show us individuals who modelled this quality.

## 2. **The example of Moses**

Numbers 12:3 records this statement about Moses. *Now Moses was a very humble [gentle / meek] man, more humble [gentle / meek] than anyone else on the face of the earth.* However, this is not how he would have been described as a young man. In Exodus 2:11-12 it states: *One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. <sup>12</sup> Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.* There was no gentleness here. Rightly, there was righteous anger at the appalling scene he witnessed, and in a context where there was no hope of justice in the courts, as the Israelites were deemed as possessions, it was difficult to see how the problem might have been addressed another way. However, God did not see that this was an appropriate way for the forthcoming leader of His people to behave. God wanted Moses to exercise more self-control and exercise leadership in a manner more fitting for a man of God. He would have the extraordinary privilege of being the only ordinary human being recorded in the Bible of having an audible regular communication with God. Exodus 33:9-11 records this extraordinary privilege. <sup>9</sup> *As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the Lord spoke with Moses. <sup>10</sup> Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshipped, each at the entrance to their tent. <sup>11</sup> **The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one***

*speaks to a friend.* Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young assistant Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent. The gentleness for which he was famed did not come from his youth, but in the later Moses who returned from Midian. There were three incidents that demonstrated a ‘new’ Moses whom God could use.

(a) **His response to his calling** (Exodus 3:11) *But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’* What a contrast to the young man who just knew he was the best qualified individual and could not wait to get on with the job. It is possible that the exodus from Egypt might have happened earlier had Moses been more gentle and humble in the exercise of his calling. It was to take time out in the desert for Moses to become small enough for God to use. No longer did he see himself as the great saviour of the nation. Instead he is acutely aware of his own shortcomings and will have an extended conversation with God about his inadequacies for the task ahead of him. The person whom God calls to service is equipped by Him with the resources we need. In that context we can say with the apostle Paul: *I can do everything through Him who strengthens me* (Philippians 4:13). A called person in God’s service is aware of their own inadequacies alongside His all-sufficient grace which enables us to accomplish the task to which He has called us.

(b) **His response to domestic difficulties** (Numbers 12:1) *Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite.* Moses had married a woman of a different ethnic background to his family. The Lord alone knows the details of why his siblings took issue with his marriage to this particular woman at that specific time. Moses did not react aggressively but left it with the Lord. Presumably, the comments about his wife were made behind his back and not to his face; the old Moses would have confronted them and demanded it was sorted out. Numbers 12 records that the Lord got involved and expressed His anger at their wrong attitude. Moses throughout behaved in an exemplary fashion and even prayed for them to the Lord as they resolved this matter. The old Moses would have given them a ‘piece of his mind’; the ‘new’, older and more gracious Moses did not defend himself but took it to God to sort out. His confidence in God was reflected in the gentleness of his character in times of real pressure and personal disappointment. How are you and I in such times? Are we like the ‘young’ Moses in wanting ‘to give as much back as is given to us’? Or are we like the ‘new’ Moses allowing God to vindicate our reputation when unfairly treated?

(c) **His response to his greatest disappointment** (Numbers 20:9-12) However, privileges bring responsibilities. Unfortunately on a tough day at the Waters of Meribah, many years later in the desert, when the pressures of leading unhelpful Israelites through the desert became too much, as he heard their repeated complaints about the lack of water and the inadequacy of the range of available foodstuff. When he and Aaron turned to the Lord the message they were given was to go to a nearby rock and speak to it and water would gush out of the rock. What happened next? *Moses took the staff from the Lord’s presence, just as he commanded him.*<sup>10</sup> *He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, ‘Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?’*<sup>11</sup> *Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.*<sup>12</sup> *But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in Me enough to honour Me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.’* (Numbers 20:9-12). There was no recorded dissent from Moses. He appears to have accepted it with extraordinary grace. He had learned to trust that God knows what is best, even if we see things differently at the time. In life all of us will have our disappointments –some very deep that affect us for years; our calling is to trust Him to direct our path. See Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; <sup>6</sup>in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight.* Are we willing to do so?

3. **The example of Jesus** Too often the pictures or representations of Jesus in artwork convey a misleading impression of Him. They can portray someone so nice and inoffensive but quite unsuited to making any impression on a violent sinful world. No-one could say a bad word about such a figure, but neither would 'a real man' want to imitate such a way of living. Sadly too many people have this false image of Jesus. They have confused gentleness or meekness with weakness which is a big mistake.

(a) **The Old Testament portrayal of Jesus** (Isaiah 42:1-4) *'Here is My servant, whom I uphold, My chosen one in whom I delight; I will put My Spirit on Him, and He will bring justice to the nations. <sup>2</sup> He will not shout or cry out, or raise His voice in the streets. <sup>3</sup> A bruised reed He will not break, and a smouldering wick He will not snuff out. In faithfulness He will bring forth justice; <sup>4</sup> He will not falter or be discouraged till He establishes justice on earth.* The prophesied Messiah's way would not be that of the military strong man, but one who by His example and lifestyle would model the way each and every one of His followers should live. Zechariah's prophecy of the coming king into Jerusalem, fulfilled on a day we call Palm Sunday, makes the same point. Zechariah 9:9 (quoted in Matthew 21:5) states: *Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, **lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*** The consistency of the portrayal is clear.

(b) **The New Testament portrayal of Jesus** (Philippians 2:5-11) *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> who, being in very nature God, **did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage;** <sup>7</sup> rather, **He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.** <sup>8</sup> **And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!** <sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* This very early Christian hymn of praise to the Lord Jesus that Paul quotes in this letter is abundantly clear that Jesus lived the calling prophesied of Him in the Old Testament. In II Corinthians 10:1 Paul began an appeal to this congregation with these words: *By the **humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you...*** In the Gospels a similar picture is evident. Words often quoted in pastoral settings found in Matthew 11:28-30 also fit this image of Jesus very well. *'Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, **for I am gentle and humble in heart,** and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.'* The contrast between the Christian and Muslim faiths could not be greater than at this point. The former has spread primarily by ordinary people walking the walk of faith and the latter primarily by military conquest and a demand for submission to Allah. In the book of Revelation John captures both the inner strength and graciousness of Jesus in the complex imagery of Revelation 5. In the vision he looks for *the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, [who] has triumphed.* However, what did he see? *Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders...(Revelation 5:5-6).* Those present were offering worship declaring: *'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!'* (Revelation 5:12). However the word John uses for 'Lamb' is not the common one (αμνος- see John 1:29 where John the Baptist says of Jesus: *Look, **the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world)*** used in the Bible for the little cuddly creature we see in the fields each Spring, but (αρνιον -see for example Revelation 17:14) the word used of the ram that leads the flock; guards and protects it. This character quality of Jesus in the Bible portrays strength under control to accomplish the most amazing goals. Gentleness must never be confused with weakness.

#### 4. A vision for promoting gentleness

(a) **In living our daily lives** In Titus 3:2 the apostle Paul challenged the young church on Crete to be countercultural in all their interpersonal relations, not just in their marriages, family life and friendship and within the church family, but in the workplace or wherever they found themselves...*to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle towards everyone.* It is a pattern to follow; an approach to take, wherever we are as we walk in the footsteps of Jesus. The picture Paul portrayed to the Thessalonian Christians of how he and his team worked as church leaders in the early stages of its life, is a wonderful picture for us to remember today. ...*Just as a nursing mother cares for her children,*<sup>8</sup> *so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well* (I Thessalonians 2:7b-8). Peter in I Peter 3:15 reminded his readers how they ought to go about sharing their faith. *But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.* It is always about winning the person not the argument. If you win the argument and lose the person- you have lost! Sadly so many people, and so many Christians, over the centuries have not grasped this truth with sometimes catastrophic consequences.

(b) **In handling differences and church discipline** The way of life of a follower of Jesus is to model a gracious Christ-like existence. The focus is not on our rights or asserting our voice, but honouring Him. Jesus could have challenged the hated poll tax of His day, but He chose to focus on much bigger issues and advocated to His followers to pay the tax (Matthew 17:24-27); in John 8 when the mob whipped up by some Pharisees dragged before Jesus a woman caught in the *very act of adultery* He knew the game they were playing and refused to join it. His gentle gracious manner of responding to the appeals for a verdict of condemnation echo down the ages. *When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'*<sup>8</sup> *Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.*<sup>9</sup> *At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.*<sup>10</sup> *Jesus straightened up and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?'*<sup>11</sup> *'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'* (John 8:7-12) The pattern for us in dealing with misconduct was explained by Paul in Galatians 6:1: *Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.* It is not avoidance of issues but modelling the graciousness of Jesus in how we go about addressing them.

May the Lord help us in each area our lives, both individually and collectively, to model the flavour of gentleness as we seek to lead fruitful Christian lives, Amen.