

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS...GENTLENESS...

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One night when I was fifteen years old I went out to the movies by myself. The heroine in the movie was Jean Tierney, a delicate, finely chiseled beauty who played the part of a Chinese girl and who died very sadly toward the movie's end. This information is probably irrelevant to what I have to say, but it is the sort of backdrop on which longlasting memories are hung. While I was watching the movie a great insight came to me, which I continued to ponder over the mile or so that I walked home. The insight was this: there are two basic qualities which it is very important for a person to possess, and they both begin with "G". They are gentleness and guts.

For the next several months I continued to think about what I called "the two G's." That is, I called them that to myself. I don't recall that I ever mentioned them to anybody else. Today, in fact, is the first time that I ever spoke about the two G's to anybody. But back in those days I even drew a complicated diagram for my own edification in which gentleness and guts were linked up to a host of other qualities. God is in the diagram too, and something called "mankind." Between the words "gentleness" and "guts" are two arrows pointing in opposite directions with the word "strengthens" written over them. This is to signify that gentleness and guts are mutually supporting. I believed that you could not have one without the other. Had I been to theological school, I would have said they were in a dialectical relationship.

I don't believe it figured in consciously, but it is possible that I was influenced by an advertisement for piston rings that ran for years when I was a boy. The ad would show a huge Green Bay Packer type petting a kitten or delicately holding up a teacup. Underneath came the slogan:

"Tough, but Oh so gentle."

In any case, I was convinced that gentleness and guts went together and that if you had both of them you had what mattered most. If you wonder how I can remember the details of my diagram, the answer is that I still have it. It is always instructive to see where your head was when you were fifteen or sixteen years old.

Even today I think that gentleness and guts are not a bad combination. They may not take in all the territory that goes into Christian character, but they cover a good deal. One term lifts up the side of character that has to do with courage and endurance. The other term points to the side of Christian character having to do with sensitivity to others. The word translated "gentleness" in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible is rendered "meekness" in the King James. The word implies humility and mildness. But it does not imply the "wishy washy" image which unfortunately became attached to the word "meek" in recent years.

On the contrary, I think my early insight that true gentleness and guts go together was probably right. Genuine gentleness arises from strength. It is the nervous, yappy little dogs that nip our ankles from behind. The big powerful breeds are often the gentlest ones.

One of our members loaned me the book about the rabbits, Watership Down. In this story there is a big, fighting rabbit named Bigwig, who corresponds roughly to Ajax in the Iliad. He is a rabbit with great courage and fortitude, a gutsy rabbit. Admittedly, he does grow violent on occasion. But his gentleness comes out in his care for the weaker rabbits.

Guts can lead to gentleness and gentleness to guts. The gentle person need not be a milktoast. Gentleness means exposing one's feelings to the feelings of others, and that is always an act of courage.

Because gentleness and guts go together we cannot excuse ourselves from possessing one because we claim to have the other. There was a time, perhaps, when people might have tried to excuse themselves in this way on the grounds of their sex. Woman was "the gentle sex;" therefore men did not need to be gentle. Men were the brave sex; therefore women did not need to be brave. But part of what the sexual revolution in our culture means is that we cannot take refuge in these shallow classifications anymore.

Back around the turn of the century, my grandmother used to tell me, it was fashionable for women to faint frequently. Every time the pressure of living got a little too painful a woman could just conk over and pass out and everyone would call her a fine lady.

Well, the ladies cannot get away with that anymore..

There was a time, too, when a man was expected to cut up rough occasionally. If a man came home on a Friday night after a long stop at the tavern and cuffed his wife around for half an hour or so, who was she to complain? That's just the way men are.

Well, the men cannot get away with that anymore either.

Fortunately we are breaking free of such cultural stereotypes. There is nothing contradictory between gentleness and manliness. Nor is gentleness a quality that ought to be confined to very special situations. It is true that there are times when sensitivity to the needs of humanity may call for a strategy that is rather un-gentle. Great prophets are abrasive. Amos was not gentle when he denounced the crimes of Israel. The conventional figure of Jesus "meek and mild" distorts the portrayal of him in the Gospels. But while Jesus could be stern and harsh in dealing with groups of people, with ideas and with styles of behavior, he nearly always was gentle in dealing with individuals.

The essence of gentleness is sensitivity to the feelings of other people. Sometimes that very sensitivity may lead to righteous indignation. The best way to move the hearts of people may be at times to pepper them with fire and brimstone. But such methods need to be used sparingly. My impression is that by and large the confrontation politics technique that some people employed in our churches a few years ago did not work in most instances. Such methods only pounded people more firmly into their fears and prejudices.

Reinhold Niebuhr could play the role of wasp-tongued prophet very effectively. Yet early in his career he came to the conclusion that there are "preachers who are in danger of degenerating into common scolds."

"People," he said, "must be charmed into righteousness." Coming from one of our typical suburban pastors I would be suspicious of such a statement. But coming from a man who gave a lifetime to social righteousness, it is worthy of respect.

My guess is that the quality of gentleness was very much needed in the life of those first Christian churches. The Christian movement was lively, enthusiastic, exhilarating. But there was a tinge of fanaticism about it. Recent converts accustomed to a rather loose way of life sometimes received harsh treatment from older members. Factions arose, controversies spread. An arrogant, overly aggressive spirit was a constant peril as it is in any fervent movement. For these reasons the New Testament writers counsel their fellow Christian to show the spirit of gentleness that was in Christ.

In our day, too, there is need for gentleness. We live in a time of strident voices, coarse language and violent actions. When Rap Brown, himself a violent man, declared that "Violence is as American as blueberry pie," he came nearer to the truth than we cared to admit.

Kent State is in the news again.

"Flowers are better than bullets" said Allison Krause to the officer that day when he ordered the guardsmen to remove the flower from the muzzle of his rifle. "Flowers are better than bullets."

Later in ungentle rage she shouted obscenities and that was more than strong men could endure.

"But flowers are better than bullets," she said that day she fell dying in the parking lot three hundred and forty-three feet away from the nearest soldier she threatened.

Things like flowers might bring a gentling influence into the world. Henry Ward Beecher in the days of his fame once reminisced about how he traveled as a young man in the West. Now the West in those days was Indiana. Usually, the preacher recalled, he slept in a farmer's barn. The problem was to choose the right barn. "I watched," he said, "for houses with flowers in the window. For when I found a flower, I found a woman that loved flowers; and when I found a woman that loved flowers, I found a woman that had a natural element of refinement about her."

Yes, and I suspect a gentleness too. This is where the gentle and the genteel come together. The gentry are not always gentle, heirs of the robber barons that so many of them are. But a woman with "that natural element of refinement" which plants zinnias in the wilderness, she is a gentlewoman regardless of her lineage.

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The fruit of the Spirit is gentleness. In my ancient diagram I have an arrow leading back from God to the individual to signify that God contributes to gentleness in people. I think I was right about that. The God who holds our fragile humanity in his hands is a gentle God. The more we trust those hands, the more that gentleness rubs off on us.