

The fruit of the Spirit, part 8: Gentleness

The keys to healthy friendships, businesses,
and marriages

Message for Sunday, March 6, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Galatians 5:22-23 and more

Children's Message: put up the symbol of gentleness: an eggshell, painted like a person.

How many of you have ever ridden a horse? Was it fun? Was it scary, being way up high?

It takes a lot of work to get a horse ready to ride. And I don't mean getting the saddle on. I'm talking about the person who trains the horse, so that it will allow you to climb up on its back.

It's not easy to take an animal which has never had anyone on its back, and teach it do that. If you try to climb up, the horse's natural instinct is to buck you off. Teaching the animal to let someone ride is sometimes called "breaking the horse." It doesn't sound very nice, and the way that some people do it isn't very nice.

Monty Roberts tours the country demonstrating an interesting technique in training in horses which have never been ridden.

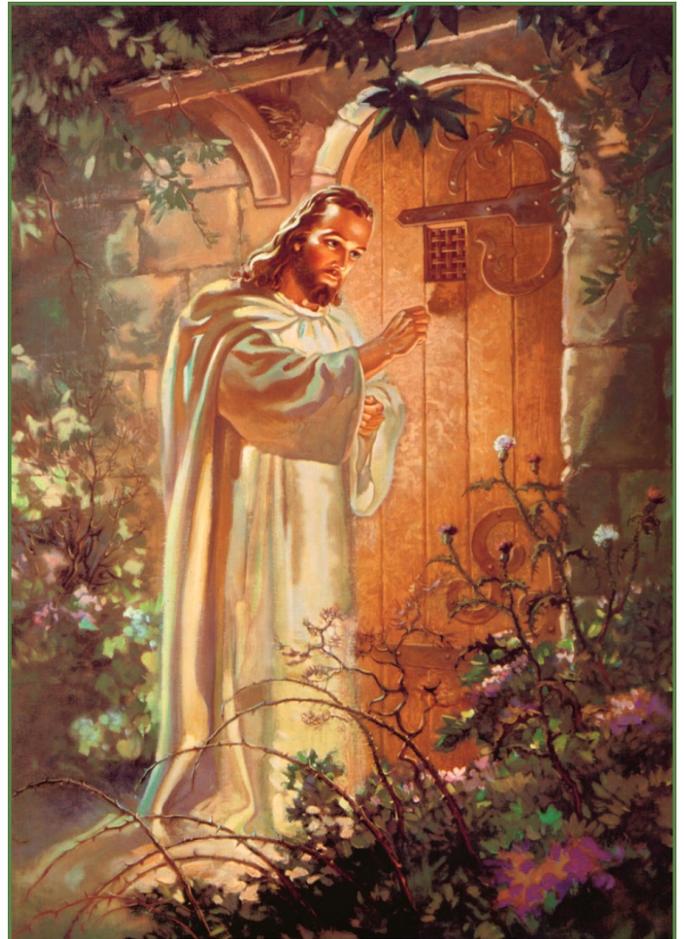
He explains to his audience that through a series of words, hand signals, and eye contact he will communicate with the horse and ultimately gain the trust of the horse. The traditional way of breaking a horse is to wear the horse down for hours and sometime even days until the will of the horse is broken. This "language" he uses gains the trust of the horse.

He will demonstrate his technique by telling his audience that he will take a horse which has never been ridden, and within thirty minutes he will saddle and ride the horse. And he does so every time.

Once he has ridden the horse he will ask the crowd, sometimes 2,000 or more people, to begin screaming, stomping, and making loud noises. The crowd does that, which causes the horse to panic and run wild. Monty will once again "communicate" with the horse and the horse will

come over by his side and Monty will get on the calm horse while all of the noise is going on. Monty explains that this is because he has gained the trust of the horse.

Conclude by showing them Warner Sallman's painting of Jesus knocking at the door, asking to come in to our lives.



There is no door handle outside; the door can be opened only from the inside. Jesus is very gentle; he doesn't break us, or break in. We have to ask him to come in. Will you?

Message: The fruit of the Spirit: Gentleness

Galatians 5:22-23, New International Version:
The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

This is the eighth in a series of sermons on the fruit of the spirit. Today we're focussing on gentleness.

Through this series, I want to focus on how this fruit is a key to building healthy relationship with others.

Like firing someone. How many of you have ever had to do that? It's one of the toughest jobs a boss ever faces, and I don't know any easy way to do it. I heard of one person who tried to do it gently, though. It was an insurance company, and a young salesman was performing so poorly that they had to let him go. The manager called him into the office and said, "Son, I don't know how we would ever get along without you, but starting Monday we're going to try."

1) Gentleness is power harnessed to humility

The first thing we need to do is to understand what that word "gentleness" means. If I ask you to think of people who are successful, whether it's in business or sports or wherever, we usually describe these people as "aggressive," "strong," "determined," "ambitious," "smart" and so on. "Gentle" isn't usually a word that comes to mind. People think of "gentle" as being sweet, soft and nice, and that won't get you very far in today's world.

The Bible—as usual—challenges our preconceptions. God has a way of turning things upside down, of making small things great and great things small. Let's see what the Bible says about gentleness.

Isaiah 40:10-11, New Living Translation:
The Sovereign Lord is coming in all his glorious power. He will rule with awesome strength. See, he brings his reward with him as he comes. He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.

Did you catch that? *Awesome strength! Glorious power!* Underline those phrases in your notes. Tied together with that is a picture of a shepherd caring for the sheep... *gently*. Strength and gentleness go together.

Now let's see how Jesus describes himself.

Matthew 11:28-30, New Revised Standard Version:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Gentle. Humble. Yet also strong enough to help carry our burdens. Someone you can lean upon.

There are many examples of Jesus' gentleness in his relationships. Here he is on trial, about to be sentenced to a terrible death on a cross.

John 19:9-11, New Century Version:
[Pilate] went back inside the palace and asked Jesus, "Where do you come from?" But Jesus did not answer him. Pilate said, "You refuse to speak to me? Don't you know I have power to set you free and power to have you crucified?"

Jesus answered, "The only power you have over me is the power given to you by God."

Jesus could have argued his innocence. He could have fought back with his divine powers. He could have called for an army of angels to attack the guards. Instead, he spoke either not at all, or very softly. He was gentle with Pilate, just the same as he was with the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years [Mark 5:25-34], and with many, many others.

Now let's see a description of Jesus' followers (hint: that means you and me today as well!).

James 3:17, New Living Translation:
But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no partiality and is always sincere.

2 Timothy 2:24-25, New Living Translation:
The Lord's servants must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone. They must be able to teach effectively and be patient with difficult people. They should gently teach those who oppose the truth.

Look at the words which are associated with gentle: pure, peace-loving, willing to yield, full of mercy, full of good deeds, impartial, sincere, not quarrelsome, kind, effective, patient.

I know I'm being simplistic here, but I'll try to summarize all this in a single statement:

“Gentleness is power harnessed to humility.” Power is the ability to have your way. Humility is the attitude of thinking first about others.

2) Gentleness: a soothing, calming power

There are many areas in our lives where we need gentleness:

- in our marriages and families
- the way we tell others about Jesus
- the way we deal with conflict
- how you treat people who aren't as capable as you
- and yes, even the way we run businesses

I'm going to touch on just one of these: dealing with conflict. When tempers are flaring, when winning is everything, when courtesy has gone out the window — in this situation, a gentle person can be a calming power.

Proverbs 15:1, New Century Version:

A gentle answer will calm a person's anger, but an unkind answer will cause more anger.

My brother-in-law Alex is part of a construction business in Oshawa. Alex told me what he does when someone comes into his office, angry and swearing. Rather than get angry back, he just walks out saying, “When you're ready to talk business, let me know, and I'll come back.” It's really amazing how quickly people settle down when treated gently like that.

Peter Marshall, an American preacher some years ago, put it this way in a prayer: “Lord, when we are wrong, make us willing to humbly change. And Lord, when we are right, make us easy to live with.”

Prayer is a vital part of gentleness. Remember: it's the fruit of the spirit. When you've run out of patience, when you've put up with more than enough trouble from others, when you want action and you want it now — in short, when the time for gentleness has gone, and it's time to take matters into your own hands and get results, then it's time for prayer.

Whatever else gentleness means, it most certainly does *not* mean being spineless or wimpy. People who don't fight back are often given these labels. I suggest that *not* fighting back, receiving taunts and jeers and even punches but without retaliating in kind, requires much more strength and courage, than it does to start a fight.

Being gentle when others are angry comes from a person who is in close touch with God.

3) An example of gentleness

The best example of gentleness I know of is from the life of a person who studied the Gospels, who was deeply attracted to Jesus, who modelled his life on Jesus' teachings, but who never became a Christian. Mohandas Gandhi remained a faithful Hindu all his life.¹

In 1947, India was divided into two nations: Pakistan and India. Many Hindus found themselves caught in a hostile Muslim Pakistan, and likewise many Muslims wanted to leave India, which was mostly Hindu. Thus began the great migration, with millions of people going both ways across the new border. It was also the beginning of much killing between these two groups.

The British sent their troops to keep order in western India (but even so, more than half a million would be murdered). That left no one to keep order on the eastern border. Calcutta is a Indian city of several million on the border, and the killing began there as well.

Mohandas Gandhi was the spiritual leader of India, having led a non-violent movement for independence against the British. Lord Mountbatten, the British official in charge, asked his former enemy for help. He asked Gandhi to go to Calcutta and restore order.

When Gandhi arrived at the Calcutta train station, he was met by a large crowd, which was quite normal. But this crowd greeted him, not with cheers, but with shouts of anger. They were Hindus out for revenge, and they saw Gandhi as a sell-out.

¹ There are many sources for the life of Gandhi, one of the best being the feature length movie made a few years ago.

This account is taken from Philip Yancey's book *Soul Survivor*.

They had seen their relatives butchered and their wives and daughters raped by Muslim mobs, and they were thirsty for blood, not peace.

Gandhi, at that time 78 years old, walked off the train in a hail of rocks and bottles. He raised his hand in peace and spoke to the crowd, “You wish to do me ill, and so I am coming to you.” The crowd fell silent. “I have come here to serve Hindus and Muslims alike. I am going to place myself under your protection. You are welcome to turn against me if you wish. I have nearly reached the end of life’s journey. I have not much further to go. But if you again go mad with killing, I will not be a living witness to it. If one more person in Calcutta is killed, I will fast to death.” He had used this tactic before in the struggle for independence, and the people knew he meant what he said.

Peace reigned in Calcutta that day, and for more than two weeks. He went to live in the worst slum area of the city. People gathered outside his home each night to attend his prayer meetings — a thousand at first, then ten thousand, and finally a million people jamming the streets to hear him lecture over loudspeakers on peace and love and brotherhood. While the rest of the nation was fighting and killing, and whole provinces were burning out of control, not one act of violence occurred in Calcutta.

On the seventeenth day, though, a number of Muslims were killed in several attacks, and Gandhi began his fast to the death. This time, it was not against the British, but against his own people. He vowed he would not eat again unless all those who had committed the violence repented and solemnly vowed to stop.

At first no one cared. What was the life of one shrivelled old man in the face of an assault on your religion and family and honour? Revenge seemed more appropriate than forgiveness. Gunfire echoed throughout the streets.

Within twenty-four hours Gandhi’s already weak heart started missing one beat in four, and his blood pressure was dropping swiftly. The next day, his vital signs continued to plummet, and the rioters paused to listen to the hourly radio broadcasts of the old man’s condition. Soon the whole city’s attention

was riveted on the straw pallet where he lay, too weak to speak. The violence stopped. No one was willing to be the one responsible for his death.

But that wasn’t enough. He continued fasting. One day more and the gang responsible for the murders came to Gandhi to confess, and to lay their arms at his feet. A truck arrived at his house, filled with guns, grenades and other weapons that people had surrendered voluntarily. The leaders of every religious group in the city — Hindu, Muslim and others — signed a declaration guaranteeing that no more killing would take place. Gandhi took his first sips of orange juice and said his prayers.

Gentleness: a wonderful power to bring calm in a storm. Are you spreading your gentleness around?

Next Steps:

- Pray for gentleness. Pray for the power to remain gentle and humble, even in difficult situations.
- Try responding to anger with gentleness. Be ready to be surprised! But remember: staying close to God is the key.