

And now we come to the end of our journey through the fruits of the spirit! This week we're taking a look at gentleness. Gentleness in how God treats us, how we treat others, and how we treat ourselves, each of these is important. And to catch anyone up to speed on the previous fruits this summer, they were: *Love, Joy, Peace, Forbearance, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-control*. So, let's dive in.

Now, finding a good way to describe gentleness without just using it in a sentence like "someone who is gentle", is quite difficult. Some other words that come to mind (thanks to thesaurus.com) are: kindness, tenderness, carefulness, meekness. The next best thing to describe a concept is to point to a person that exemplifies it. I believe we all have someone in mind when we think of gentleness, can you think of someone now? Chris Murphy comes to mind after being here at First Pres for over a year now and I feel like most of you would feel the same. Let me give you a couple more examples.

An example for me was thinking about the lion Aslan in CS Lewis' Narnia stories. If you've been living under a rock and haven't endured a limited selection of entertainment choices growing up, The Chronicles of Narnia was an allegorical fantasy series written in 1950 that follows the stories of Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy going through a portal to the fictional realm of Narnia. Aslan is described as being the true king of Narnia who has returned to help the kiddos to free Narnia of the White Witch's rule. When asked if Aslan is safe, Mr. Beaver says: "Safe? Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." Aslan has the power to create and destroy worlds, and yet his gentleness to these kids and animals is evident in their quest to free their world of evil as the story progresses.

What would I be doing with my time today if I did not include an example of gentleness as portrayed by Aragorn in The Lord of the Rings? In the Fellowship of the Ring, before the famous "you have my sword, and my bow, and my axe" quote, you have Aragorn tell Frodo, "If by my life or death I can protect you, I will". Fast forward to Return of the King, the third part of the Lord of the Rings, and as Aragorn and the armies of the free peoples of middle earth are facing the forces of darkness at the Black Gate, he turns and whispers "For Frodo". The choral musical piece sounds as they charge which echoes those same words in elvish.

And again, if you haven't invested 12+ hours on a Saturday watching all three extended editions, I'm not sure you're truly living. According to Reddit User **Particular_Reason143**, by common standards, Aragorn should be the one taking the ring to Mordor; but instead puts his royal life on the line to protect Frodo, giving him the time he needs to reach Mount Doom. He does the right thing, and chooses to play second fiddle in order to make the plan work. Aragorn shows gentleness to Frodo and lays aside his privilege of royalty to serve the greater good through his kindness and care.

Each of these examples have some amount of status that in most cases, could be used for great or bad things. It's how they choose to wield the things they've been given that makes or breaks their ability to exemplify gentleness. One of my favorite quotes from Tolkien is when Gandalf says to Frodo in the Fellowship of the Ring: **"All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us"**. I think that lines up quite nicely with how we are called to live.

Now taking a look at gentleness in our passage of **Phillipians 4:4-9** today, Paul is encouraging us with a call to rejoice, or as my good friend NT Wright says, "Celebrate".

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

Now, I'm already struggling to fulfil this goal and if this was my work evaluation, I'd have to put down a "does not meet expectations". I remember a time where Emily and I were having some of our former college students over for dinner from our young adult group that we helped lead at a previous church. Emily was working hard to finish up her degree that summer and we were talking about some of the ups and downs of the coursework. Thinking that I was hilarious, I made a sarcastic joke with my dry humor that in hindsight probably got more awkward laughs than I realized and ended up hurting Emily's feelings as the joke was at her expense. My words were not gentle, even if there was a hint of truth in the cutting remark. Afterwards, we needed to talk and I apologized and while it's easy to say that sometimes things just come out, that doesn't make up for the fact that I was not portraying gentleness in my words.

So instead of using my words to harm, what could I have done different? I think gentleness would be using my words to build up, to bring up laughter in positive

ways that the joke is not at someone's expense, but for everyone's benefit. If someone is struggling, laughter and gentleness in how we encourage them goes a long way.

⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus

I know that today isn't all about me, but I feel like yet again, I'm struggling to keep up with these goals. Don't be anxious – sorry. Every situation not - quite doing that. Make your requests to God – complaining to others probably isn't quite the same. This is a beautiful couplet of verses that I think I'm still working out how it plays out in my life. I hope you're doing the same, and if you've figured it out, please let me know some pointers that have worked for you! I think my struggle is knowing the right answers and the right things to do, but the actually doing them or doing them in gentleness, in love, and not out of fear or anxiety is quite difficult.

Maybe the first step is just to try. Try presenting your requests to God. Trust that in some small way, maybe the act itself is part of drawing near and loosening anxiety's grip.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

I want you to take a quick moment to think about this for yourself: If you were to guess what the amount of time you spend reflecting on those things Paul just listed, what would it be? **(PAUSE)**

I think for me, I think that's another area that I could stand to improve. It's not that everything I spend time thinking of is bad, but maybe there's some things that don't matter as much as I think they do; maybe there's some things I can focus less on that cause anxiety or the fear of missing out. Maybe it's the journey and not the destination with this one too; as I think we will always be able to continue to grow and mature in what we set our minds and hearts on.

This week, maybe we can try settings aside a few minutes to focus on what matters. Set a timer for like 5 minutes and reflect on something good. It's easy to spend time stewing over what's bad, so even just taking a small step on what we're putting our minds on can make a difference.

⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Paul is a practical guy; he's basically saying "Just Do It", put it into practice; and you know what? God will be there in the midst of it. God will be on the journey with you. You will be little Christs to those that you encounter and your gentleness will pave the way for God to work in and through you. Paul later says in **Colossians 3:12-17**:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Jesus is our greatest example of gentleness; Aslan, Aragorn, myself, are ultimately just imitations of Christ. Jesus modeled what it looks like and Paul calls to the same: if we are to call ourselves Christians, do these things. I love how I've seen these qualities be portrayed by our church family and I hope to continue to see us each growing more and more like Christ. For Jesus himself said in **Matthew 11:29**:

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.

Rest for our souls; man, that sounds incredibly nice right about now. Gentleness is strength, and if it's cool enough for Jesus, I should probably keep improving my gentleness game.

Wrapping up, I want to take a moment to reflect on some wisdom shared by Rachel Held Evans about gentleness. Rachel was an author who tragically passed away in 2019 that left an impact on many people wrestling with their faith through her books and speaking, myself included. In her book, "A Year of Biblical Womanhood", Rachel spends a year pursuing a different virtue each month vowing to take all of the Bible's instructions for women as literally as possible for a year. In reflecting on gentleness, Rachel shares the following:

I think maybe God was trying to tell me that gentleness begins with strength, quietness with security. A great tree is both moved and unmoved, for it changes with the seasons, but its roots keep it anchored in the ground. Mastering a gentle and quiet spirit didn't mean changing my personality, just regaining control of it, growing strong enough to hold back and secure enough to soften.

I believe that applies to all of us. Strength used correctly, control of who we are, and growing secure enough to be able to love and care for others as Jesus would. Gentleness it would seem, is a lifelong journey that's a trajectory, not a destination. I'm thinking that if we spend a little more time rejoicing in Jesus and trusting that He will walk alongside us and model gentleness to us, maybe we can do the same to others?

Let's Pray