

Sermon 23: Philippians 4:5: Window-dressing Your Witness

OUTLINE

The gentleness of Jesus to you
The gentleness of Christians to all

INTRODUCTION

What does the world think of Christians? What the public perception of Christianity is and what the public perception ought to be are worlds apart. Christianity is often in the news for all the wrong reasons. Think of the recent storming of Capitol Hill in Washington and how Christian Nationalists were blowing shofars; doing what was called a 'Jericho March' seeking to overturn the election results.¹ It leaves a bad taste in the mouths of all true Christians because we know that this is not representative of our witness. We see Christian Nationalism as just another politicizing of the gospel and not an indication of the true mission of the church or how we are to serve Christ. When we think of how the world ought to see us we think of verses like John 13:35, 'By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' Or, 1 Pet. 2:12, 'Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.' Phil. 2:14-15, 'Do all things without grumbling or disputing, ¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.' Another verse that should come to mind is Phil. 4:5, 'Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand.' Paul is calling us to what someone has called, 'cultivate an outgoing personality.' As part of our faithfulness in standing firm we have to communicate what we are all about to the world. We are being called to window-dress our faith. This should not be confused with the duplicity involved in sculpting an online persona where all the photographs are postured and doctored. Paul is calling us to let something that we have be on display to the world. It is this 'something' that we now need to think about.

Before we look at what it is, first a word about how to translate this verse. The ESV has strangely translated the word as 'reasonableness' but it should be something like 'gentleness' as noted in the footnote. The word translated 'reasonableness' occurs 5 times in the NT plus two cognate forms. Here they are, 1 Tim. 3:3, 'not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.' Titus 3:2, 'to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.' James 3:17, 'But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.' 1 Pet. 2:18, 'Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.' And the fifth is Phil. 4:5. At least the ESV should have been consistent and translated it as 'gentleness.' Now it is recognized that this word is not easily exhausted by one of our English words. One commentator suggests the following possibilities, 'forebearance, yieldedness, geniality, kindliness, gentleness, sweet reasonableness, considerateness, charitableness, mildness,

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2022/12/29/ian-6-report-christian-nationalism/> accessed 9/14/2023

magnanimity, generosity' and 'big heartedness.'² I think gentleness is our best translation and what we will be focusing on in this message.

As we consider our witness before the world, we want to first think of Christ's gentleness towards us; and then our gentleness towards others. These will be our two points.

The gentleness of Jesus to you

We need to begin by exploring what this word gentleness really represents. We can see from the way it is used in other places in contrast to being quarrelsome and divisive that it leans towards being peace-loving and amenable. Some have suggested that it means a gracious humility that is willing to put others first and suffer injustice. The opposite of self-love and self-fulfillment because those focused upon themselves insist upon their own rights and are quick to anger, revenge and division when things don't go their way. Some have called it a calm and kind disposition that responds with generosity to aggression and injustice. 'Aristotle explained "gentleness" as a willingness to forgo one's own rights according to the letter of the law.'³ As Christians we have the best way to understand this by considering the gentleness of Christ to us in the gospel.

One of the cognate uses of the word is found in 2 Cor. 10:5, 'I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!' Paul in this verse is dealing with a difficult situation where he has been slandered and his authority as an apostle has been undermined through the influence of false apostles. He makes his appeal to these disloyal Corinthians on the basis of the meekness and gentleness of Christ. It is telling that when Paul thinks of Christ and makes an appeal on the basis of some aspect of His character to move the Corinthians to their duty, it is this 'gentleness' that comes to the foreground. Meekness would be the humility and servanthood of Christ, but His gentleness refers to his dealings with us as sinners.

We are called to imitate Christ, we are saved and filled with the Spirit to be conformed to the perfect image of His humanity perfected in God's image. That Holy Spirit causes various aspects of His character to sprout in us as fruits of the Spirit. One of those is gentleness. This is a spirit wrought gentleness that the Christian bears. What is the difference between the gentleness that we show and the gentleness someone in the world might show? All of us are made in the image of God and so have some common definition of gentleness. But as with all things sin comes in and pollutes it. Unbelievers produce a form of gentleness but it is done from a heart oriented away from God, driven by wrong motives, and using lesser examples to form it. But in Christ we have the perfect expression of God's gentleness in flesh and His Spirit within us to renew us in the image of God from which we have fallen. That gentleness is seen specifically in Christ's dealing with broken sinners. He does not heap up condemnation and castigate the lifestyle sinner like the woman at the well; He speaks the truth in love and she is saved. He presents God as a Father who is willing to take back a disrespectful and rebellious child that demanded their inheritance only to blow it all. God is portrayed as willing to accept any sinner who will repent and come to

² Hendriksen, p193.

³ Dennis E. Johnson, [Philippians](#), ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, 1st ed., Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 267.

Him for mercy. Jesus was willing to eat with tax collectors and sinners, to earn the scorn of religious hypocrites because of his willingness to teach those who were ignorant, compassionate towards them seeing them as deeply needy like sheep without a shepherd.

Christ describes Himself as gentle towards sinners when he claims the messianic prophecy of Is. 42:1-4 as speaking of himself, specifically that the bruised reed he will not break and the smouldering wick he will not snuff out, Matthew 12:20, 'a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.' This is what we are as sinners. A reed which is used for its structural integrity to hold something straight or upright like a support we might bind a growing vine to, if bruised is useless. A bruised reed is not quite broken yet, but near to it, and needs a support itself. Christ unlike the impatient gardner who would quickly and angrily break the useless reed and throw it on the woodpile for burning tends to it and heals it. Likewise think of a guttering candle that is so weak it gives off no light; in this instance an oil lamp that has no oil left and it now is just annoyingly smoking and not giving off any light. Where the ordinary person would deal with the smoke by properly extinguishing the wick Christ does not but instead relights us. Christ takes that which is undeserving, that which is broken and repurposes us. What others would toss out for rubbish he does not. Where others would quit and cut their losses he does not. Where others would leave us in our brokenness to deteriorate even further he does not.

David who we know sinned in some very serious ways reflecting on his life recognises Gods gentleness towards him, 2 Samuel 22:36, 'You have given me the shield of your salvation, and your gentleness made me great.' Though undeserving David receives mercy. This is all of us and the foundation of all of our dealings with others no matter who they are, friend or foe. God does not wink at our sin pretending that we are better than we are. No, He absorbs the payment making amends for the wrongs we have done. Mixing mercy with justice. The justice is still there, it is paid in full at a tremendous and incomprehensible expense to himself; but the mercy towards us who are broken is there too. We must not think that this gentleness comes at the cost of God denying his holiness. It does not. This should double our wonder. For not only do we not receive what we deserve and instead are offered adoption; but He takes the punishment. Freely you have received now freely give.

It is because we have been forgiven that we are able to be gentle, even with the undeserving. Galatians 6:1 shows us how this works, 'Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.' Having awakened to the reality of our own sins and need for God this tempers how we deal with everyone else.

The gentleness of Christians to all

We have considered a definition of gentleness, the example of our gentleness, and the gospel foundation that enables our gentleness to others. Let us now consider more of what this looks like. Now firstly, we must note the general audience of the command. This is not only for the mature, but for all Christians. Secondly, note the assumption in the command, that all Christians are able because it is something that each one has access to because they are saved and filled with the Spirit. Thirdly, note the ecclesiological aspect of the command, that the witness of our gentleness is not only to be fulfilled as individuals but as

the church. Fourthly, note the object of this command, our gentleness is to be known to everyone. Let us open this up for a moment, this means that the gentleness that we are give and demonstrate is to be done in and out of the church.

Paul is well aware of the lack of gentleness that has split this congregation with the infighting of Euodia and Syntyche. The rift is public and toxic enough that it has to be addressed publicly and an intervention facilitated. No doubt the common gentleness that we are to show to each other in the church is part of what is to be demonstrated to a watching world. So how are we doing in our gentleness towards each other? Do we treat others with mercy or do we insist on a merciless justice? The religious leaders were the opposite of Christ and this manifested in a legalism, a harshness, a judgmentalism, a critical spirit that was willing to divide from those not good enough, to burden the consciences of the weak, to withhold mercy from those they determined unworthy. This crept into the church in Rome where Paul had to deal with matters related to Sabbaths, and meat and drink as the weaker and stronger brothers insisted on their own opinions rather than serving one another in love. Do people see our ready sympathy for people's suffering; our willingness to walk a long road of recovery with those trapped in addiction; that we are not constantly reacting to each other on the basis of differences over political, medical and economic opinions?

What about the others in your life, do the people in your life know you by your Christlike gentleness? Would your spouse describe you as gentle? Do you restore and heal or rub salt in the wound? Do you crush their spirit with harsh criticisms and words that wound or do you build them up? What about your children, do they describe you as gentle? Are your children drawn to you like sinners to Christ because He was compassionate and welcoming and warm, or are you harsh and strict and critical and drive them away like those who avoided the Pharisees? At work do you convey a humble servant or an entitled complainer? When a stranger meets you are they attracted to you or repelled? Do you wear an aura of warm, generous, humility and kindness or do you come across as entitled, proud, angry, unapproachable? Work colleagues, extended family, your neighbours, the person who serves you at the store, how do they see you?

But this is not the only difficult situation the Philippians faced. They were also being unjustly persecuted. You will remember that they are sharing in the animosity that led to Paul and Silas being whipped and imprisoned. Their Roman loyalties are no doubt being questioned. You can imagine the slander as Paul is imprisoned again and these churches are now associated with a prisoner in prison again. You can hear them saying, 'Yes I am sure he is innocent' dripping with sarcasm. Arrested in nearly every town, 'Yes, the problem lies with everyone else and not with him.' They are suffering unjust accusations; their names which may have been hard won are being slandered; good reputations built up over years of integrity are torn down in a day; businesses that have served the community faithfully for years are now abandoned; friend circles that used to include them are now excluding them; business partnerships are no longer forthcoming; former discounts are no longer offered; your children are cut off by their friend circles; and no one is inviting you to their parties anymore. Paul is aware of the persecution. He calls them to stand firm. He calls them to rejoice. And he calls them to return good for evil. They are to let their gentleness known to all, even those who are persecuting them.

Gentleness can only come from those who have seen the toxic way in which our selfishness drives us to mistreat other people. Ironically we are seeing this today. This is supposed to be an age where we are fighting for the rights of others, but when those personal rights are built upon the sinful and selfish desires that rule us and not the God given rights articulated in the Scriptures, a lot of damage is done in the name of freedom fighting. We live in an age of entitlement; of justifiable anger if our feelings are hurt with non PC speech; in an age of microaggressions, that when you trigger someone's state of oppression without even being aware of it; misgendering is a hate crime; in an age of cancel culture where you are a target if you are not an ally who celebrates another's personal right to choose whatever they want. Our response to those who are in the grip of the lies of sin is not to fight fire with fire, but to imitate Christ as He loved sinners, with gentleness. Our tactic is not to become cultural warriors and try and get all Christians to become political in a bid to take the public square back. Prayers for insults, not smart sarcasm; good for evil, not giving as good as we get. Compassion, generosity of spirit, willingness to forgive, humble servanthood. These are some of the ways Christ responded and how we are to show our gentleness openly to the world even while we are being persecuted. Our response to persecution is to be with the gentleness of Christ not Christian Nationalism. I know there are many who are concerned about how the world is getting worse and worse; and many are thinking that the solution is to get vocal, to get angry, to get political, to go toe to toe with the angry voices in the public square. This is when we need to remember that we have been given a task, it is to preach the word of life and be the church. To let our gentleness be known to all. If anyone is feeling frustrated and thinks we ought to be more politically active as a church, take Phil. 4:5 to heart, as well as 1 Thess. 4:9-11, 'Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, ¹⁰ for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, ¹¹ and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, ¹² so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.'

There is a very important part of the verse that we must not miss, 'The Lord is at hand.' How can we be gentle when we are mistreated, how can we respond with good for evil? Paul throws in a motivating idea. He reminds us that the Lord is at hand. Now some have taken this to mean, the Lord is near. In other words that God is with you when you suffer, that He will never leave you or forsake you; and this should enable you to return good for evil and maintain gentleness and not vengeance in the face of persecution. This is a possible translation. But given the context in Phil. 3:20-21 where Paul mentions the second coming of Christ, the return of Jesus to rescue His church and judge our enemies is the most likely meaning. 'But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.' Just as the second coming keeps us from false teaching and temptation; the second coming can motivate us to stay gentle because He is the warrior judge who is going to come to end all injustice, to rescue His bride, and to bring an end to all our pain. The Bible very clearly teaches us that Jesus is going to return as a conquering King and build His kingdom, the New Creation; and topple every ungodly government; and cause every knee to bow before Him. For this reason our main actions in spiritual warfare are prayer and faithfully proclaiming the word. Our job is to be the church and witness to Christ, not to try and do the job He will do when He returns. That is why gentleness and not

political activism is how we arm ourselves and dress our witness. Here in the West our democratic environment and the fact that anyone can start a social media platform to promote a message means we have more opportunities to speak out on all sorts of issues that Christians in the first century did not; but we must beware that we do not get off mission and forget our main task. Do good deeds to the needy; be a good citizen who utilizes your democratic opportunities; but make sure you don't mix the Great Commission with these things succumbing to mission drift.

We must not be tripped up by the language 'at hand.' We know that the Bible often speaks about Christ's nearness. This is not an attempt on Paul's part to date set and predict the coming of Christ. This language reminds us that there is no major event on the prophetic calendar that still needs to happen. Christ can come at any time, and we must be ready.

Let us conclude. Paul is helping us present our faith to the world in a winsome way that will be attractive and will support the message that we believe and preach. He is calling all of us who have been saved by the gentleness of Christ to be gentle in and out of the church. Whether we are persecuted or not, whether everything around us is going political or not. We must be gentle because He will return and fight our battles and settle our injustices. We must commit ourselves to doing good, returning good for evil, while trusting in Him. this is how we window-dress our faith. The world may tell you that you have to enter the war over racial prejudice; that you must become an eco-warrior; that you need to be about, fill-in-the-blank or you will be irrelevant. We resist these pressures committing ourselves to God while doing good.