

# Followers of the Way

## Gentleness

**Lynda Rose, 24-06-24**

**Isaiah 42: 1-9; Matthew 11: 29**

Gentleness, the quality of being kind and sensitive to others, of being careful for their needs. I guess 'the world' doesn't always think of God as 'gentle'. The secular view seems to take the line that God's a superhuman being with control issues – He's judgmental and harsh. Capricious even. And yet, from Genesis onwards, we see God's tenderness, and His sorrow ... His grief ... for our suffering.

But to be 'gentle' does not mean that someone's soft and a pushover. On the contrary, to be genuinely gentle assumes and requires huge strength, and it's interesting, isn't it, that in Galatians 'gentleness' is identified by Paul as a fruit of the spirit. I think what he's saying from this, is that gentleness is something that emanates and follows naturally from baptism in the Spirit, and from our relationship with God. So in the sermon today, we're going to look first at gentleness in relation to God, then at Jesus, and then at what 'gentleness' means for us today.

When Adam and Eve first confess that they've disobeyed God and eaten from the tree of knowledge in the middle of the garden – something God had expressly forbidden them to do, because He'd said it would kill them – God's first reaction is to pronounce judgment on all concerned, beginning with the serpent. This is actually pretty horrific, when you think about it, but it shows that our choices and actions always have consequences. And because God is who and what He is, there's no way He will or can compromise. A little bit of evil is not okay (though this was very far from being 'a little bit' of evil, because Adam and Eve's choice changed the nature of our being), but the message is clear; goodness and evil cannot co-exist, and God won't turn a blind eye.

That's something all of us need to take on board today. A 'little bit' of moral rebranding is not okay and carries consequences.

But then, having pronounced judgment, God does something very strange. Instead of kicking Adam and Eve straight out of Eden, He pauses and makes for them both garments of skin, so that in this state of new awareness they'll be clothed (Genesis 3:21, 'And the Lord God made garments of skin for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.'). This, I think, is the first real manifestation of the 'gentleness' of God. Adam and Eve have sinned and put themselves under subjection to evil. God knows exactly what they've done and what they're about to face – in modern terminology, you could say He's about to cast them to the wolves – but He nevertheless takes time to make sure they're properly prepared for their new environment. He provides for them.

This is 'gentleness' in action. Adam and Eve have sinned and now have to suffer the consequences ... but God doesn't stop caring for them. More than that, we know that God has already begun to put His plan to win them back into operation. A plan that's going to involve the sacrifice of His own Son. And we hear the job description for the Saviour in the passage we've heard read from Isaiah this morning. God says, '... He will not cry or lift up His voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench...' **But**, 'he will faithfully bring forth justice' (Isaiah 42:2-3). So here we have judgment, strength ... combat – but clothed in compassion, gentleness and love.

There's so much more that could be said about the gentleness of God, but there isn't time if we're to look at Jesus too – which we must, because He embodies 100% God's character. From His birth, Jesus came to confront evil, and from the beginning of His ministry, with the temptations in the wilderness, confronting the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and violently casting out the money changers from the temple, that's what we see, time and time again. Jesus was a no-compromise Messiah. But at the same time, even when physically exhausted, He had compassion and never turned away those in need (e.g. Mt 14: 13-21). He never turned away those seeking healing. And even in the last days in Jerusalem, when He knew He was going to be betrayed and crucified, He put the needs of the disciples and those around Him above His own. In particular, in His last hours among them, Jesus gave them some really intensive teaching, so that in the crisis they were about to face – when it would look as if everything they'd believed in had been wrong – they'd understand what God was doing and come through.

Again, this is gentleness at its most profound – the ability to see and care for the needs of others, even when facing something terrible, and perhaps horrific, oneself. And this care for the needs of others and obedience to God was something Jesus encouraged the disciples to emulate. Matthew 11: 29, 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,' he says, '*because I am gentle and lowly in heart...*' Perhaps in modern vernacular we'd say, I'm on your side ... I care about you, and I'm not going to pull rank, because I'm humble – not puffed up, conceited, and always wanting my own way! Which means that, if we're going to learn from Jesus, this is how we've got to behave too. But Jesus doesn't stop there. When you live like this, He promises, you'll find rest for your souls.

So Jesus is encouraging His followers to live and act towards others as He did, which means that we're to confront evil, but at the same time be compassionate and caring towards those who've fallen prey. We can only fully realise what this means when we begin to understand Jesus' strength, seeing His absolute refusal to compromise with, or be cowed by, evil. We've already noted how Jesus was quick to confront and call out hypocrisy – whatever else the Messiah could have been, it wasn't a diplomat! But perhaps His gentleness is most clearly evidenced after His arrest in Gethsemane, when He answered not a word to the charges brought against Him and refused to strike back at the soldiers. The injuries He suffered were appalling. He was flogged and ridiculed, a spiked crown was driven onto His head, He was forced to drag His cross to Golgotha (until it proved too much for him and the soldiers had to drag in someone else out from the crowd to carry it for Him), and then He had nails hammered into His hands and feet, before being swung up into the air on the cross. The pain must have been horrific, but never once, in all that time, did He turn on those who'd betrayed Him, or those treating Him so harshly. Instead, He said, 'Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're

doing.’ And He even took time to comfort one of the thieves crucified alongside Him, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise’ (Luke 23:43).

Gentleness is to act with care and compassion, but one thing it never is, is weak, soft or compromising. And it’s this behaviour, this way of acting, that we are called to emulate today, because ‘gentleness’ is a reflection of God. So what does that mean in practical terms? Well, for a start it means that we need to take the Bible very seriously and be clear of the difference between righteousness and sin, and we need to be obedient to God’s commands, whatever the cost. We need to confront and call out evil, without compromise, but without at the same time losing sight of the lost, and acting towards them always with love, care and respect. This means that we mustn’t turn a blind eye to sin, or say it doesn’t matter, but that, while defending and standing for truth, we genuinely care for others and look after them, in their needs.

This is ‘gentleness’ – truth without compromise, strength, care and compassion. Not courting popularity or position, but in all things seeking to walk in obedience to the God who loves us.