

Gentleness

Matthew 11:28-30

INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin today with a simple premise in regards to the way we are changed spiritually. Throughout this series we are studying the attributes or the perfections of Christ in order that we might ourselves apprehend those same traits in our lives. There are two main ways that we can approach this endeavor. ***We can focus our energy either on the trait itself or the person behind the trait.*** If we focus on the trait (as exemplified in Jesus), our energy goes *first* toward ways to develop that trait in our lives: Jesus is patient, so I must be more patient. Jesus has self-control, so I must have more self-control. Jesus is good, so I must be more good. This approach emphasizes our effort. Ultimately, it's a me-focused effort, or a law-based effort, often done in the flesh and not the Spirit.

But if instead we *first* focus our energy on the person behind the trait, namely Christ Jesus, our first response is not effort...but worship. ***Before we move to activity, we first sit in awe. Admiring the Savior in all His glorious attributes is essential before moving to any response.***

Worship of Jesus is what *only* produces healthy work for Jesus. We are changed by observing, by being present with Jesus, by seeing who He is in His essence. This stands in agreement with 2 Corinthians 3:18, which says, ***“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”*** This change does not come from our striving in the flesh, but from worship in the Spirit. ***This highlights the difference between law-based striving versus Spirit-based yielding.*** God works in you according to your worship of Him!

It is for this reason for my message this morning that I want our energy to first go towards observing the person of Jesus. ***As we observe Him, we cannot help but worship Him! And this worship is what will change us!*** So this morning we will focus on the gentleness of Jesus. My goal is to

elevate the perfection of gentleness in Jesus so that as you observe that in Him, your heart will worship Him. What then I pray follows is a natural invitation of Christ-like gentleness in you that results in a cultivation of gentleness inside of you by way of the Spirit.

SETUP

As we consider gentleness exemplified in Jesus today, there are three aspects of gentleness I want us to observe. In other words, these are qualities of a gentle spirit. **Those desiring a gentle spirit must be:**

- **Aware:** Sensitively perceiving the needs and feelings of others.
- **Approachable:** Graciously receiving others just as they are.
- **Affectionate:** Compassionately responding with kindness.

We will observe these qualities from the most well-known passage on gentleness, which is Matthew 11:28-30: *²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*”

In the four Gospel accounts given to us in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—eighty-nine chapters of biblical text—this is the only one place where Jesus tells us about his heart: *“I am gentle and lowly in heart.”* We learn much in the four Gospels about Christ’s teaching. We read of His birth, His ministry, and His disciples. We are told of his travels and prayer habits. We find lengthy speeches and repeated objections. And we learn in all four accounts of his unjust and shameful death and astonishing resurrection. Consider the countless pages written by theologians over the past two thousand years covering these topics in great depth.

But in only one place—perhaps the most wonderful words ever uttered by human lips—do we hear Jesus Himself open up to us his very heart: *“I am gentle and lowly in heart.”* In the one place in the Bible where the Son of God pulls back the veil and lets us peer way down into the core of who He is, we are not told that He is austere and demanding in heart. We are not

told that he is exalted and dignified in heart. We are not even told that he is joyful and generous in heart. Letting Jesus set the terms, his surprising claim is that he is *“gentle and lowly in heart.”*

One thing to get straight right from the start is that when the Bible speaks of the heart, whether OT or New, it is not speaking of our emotional life only, but of the central animating center of all we do. It is what gets us out of bed in the morning and what we daydream about as we drift off to sleep. It is our motivation headquarters. ***The heart, in biblical terms, is not part of who we are but the center of who we are.*** Our heart is what defines and directs us. That is why Solomon tells us to *“keep the heart with all vigilance, for from it flows the springs of life”* (Prov 4:23). The heart is a matter of life. It is what makes us the human being each of us is. The heart drives all we do. It is who we are.

And when Jesus tells us what animates Him most deeply, what is most true of Him—when He exposes the innermost recesses of His being—what we find there is: *gentle and lowly*. Who could have ever thought up such a Savior?

BODY

And these three qualities of Christ’s gentle spirit are on full display in this text. He is **aware**: He is sensitively perceiving the needs and feelings of others. He is **approachable**: He is graciously receiving others just as they are. And He is **affectionate**: He is compassionately responding with kindness.

1. Aware: Sensitively perceiving the needs and feelings of others.

Let’s begin with studying ***Jesus’ awareness. This is summed up in a sensitive emotional perception of the cares and needs of others.*** Here in our text Jesus is aware that there are those among Him who *“labor and are heavy laden.”* Those who labor are those who in their pride lawfully pursue righteousness. They are the straight-A students, those consumed with pleasing others and live under the assumption that God also is pleased by their laborious lifestyle. They reflect the heart of the elder

brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. They can't stand when others receive grace who don't deserve it. Their trophy of joy, contentment, and security is in following all the rules, believing this is what gains the applause of God. There is nothing wrong with such a diligent devotion to hard work, but if the motivation is to gain acceptance before God, then the system is faulty, and the bar is higher than they realize. They live under the constant pressure to live up to all that's expected, yet like a mouse spinning on a wheel, the faster they run, they are still no closer to the cheese.

This may define who you are. Jesus is sensitively aware of your spirit, your motivation for all you do.

There are also those who are *"heavy laden."* These are those weighed down by the obstacles of life. Disappointments, setbacks, sudden losses, long periods of waiting. These are just a few of the hindrances for those who are heavy laden. They know the world isn't a fair place. As a result, they live on the edge of despair and disappointment. This may be you this morning. Jesus is sensitively aware of your situation and your spirit. Like the Egyptians in Exodus 2:24-25 who were heavy laden with slavery, it says, *"God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant...God saw the people of Israel, and God knew."*

What most prevents us from noticing the needs and feelings of others? I believe it's often our busyness and self-centeredness. We become numb to the needs of others when our focus is on the needs of our own life. We have a way of blocking out the world around us when our hearts are already set on the next thing we have to accomplish. We don't want to be held back by the needs of others.

What separates Jesus from us is His mindfulness of the moment.

Jesus, as one who is gentle, was open to the ministry of the moment. He was never trying to get to the next thing to the neglect of what was before Him. He never allowed His feet to usurp what His eyes saw in the moment. Emma and I have a quote in one of our children's bedrooms from C.S. Lewis which says, *"Children are not distractions from the more important*

work. They are the most important work.” Jesus carried the same philosophy on life: ***His greatest ministry is what laid before Him.***

To complement this, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Upon seeing a man half-dead along the side of the road, a Jewish priest and Levite quickly passed by, ignoring the need before them. But then a kind Samaritan noticed the need and responded. ***Jesus’ answer to the question is that our neighbor is always the person God places in our path.*** To ignore him or her is to not love our neighbor as ourself – a failing to keep the greatest law in the commandments!

Jesus seeing these needs is what enabled Him to be open and aware of the distress all around Him. He saw all the cares of the people, what burdened them and what motivated them. ***Gentleness begins with seeing and perceiving the world before our eyes.***

2. Approachable: Graciously receiving others just as they are.

But gentleness is more than being aware; it’s being approachable. ***The second quality of a gentle spirit is being approachable.*** This means graciously receiving others just the way they are. Jesus says, ***“Come to me; learn from me.”*** There is something about who Jesus is in His identity and His person that draws us to Him. And in coming to Him, there is a healing that takes place simply by being with Him.

Why do you come to Jesus? Surely it’s not because you think He’s going to be critical and condemning! No, Jesus is ***“gentle and lowly.”*** The Greek word translated “gentle” here only occurs just three other times in the NT; in the first beatitude, that ***“the meek” will inherit the earth*** (Matt 5:5); in the prophecy in Matthew 21:5 that Jesus the king ***“is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey”***; and in Peter’s encouragement to wives to nurture more than anything else ***“the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit”*** (1 Pet 3:4). Meek. Humble. Gentle. Jesus is not trigger-happy. He’s not harsh, reactionary, or easily

exasperated. ***He is the most understanding person in the universe. The posture most natural to Him is not a pointed finger but open arms.***

The meaning of the word “lowly” overlaps with that of “gentle,” together communicating a single reality about Jesus’ heart. This specific word *lowly* is generally translated “humble” in the NT, such as in James 4:6: “***God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.***” But typically throughout the NT this Greek word refers not to humility as a virtue but to humility in the sense of destitution or being thrust downward by life circumstances. In Mary’s song while pregnant with Jesus, for example, this word is used to speak of the way God exalts those who are of humble estate (Lk 1:52). Paul uses the word when he tells us to “***not be haughty, but to associate with the lowly***” (Rm 12:16), referring to the socially unimpressive, those who are not the life of the party but rather cause the host to cringe when they show up.

The point in saying that Jesus is lowly is that he is accessible. For all His resplendent glory and dazzling holiness, His supreme uniqueness and otherness, no one in human history has ever been more approachable than Jesus Christ. No prerequisites. No hoops to jump through. B.B. Warfield, commenting on Matthew 11:29, wrote: “***No impression was left by his life-manifestation more deeply imprinted upon the consciousness of his followers than that of the noble humility of his bearing.***” The minimum bar to be enfolded into the embrace of Jesus is simply: open yourself up to Him. It is all He needs. Indeed, it is the only thing He works with.

Verse 28 of our passage tells us explicitly who qualifies for fellowship with Jesus: “***all who labor and are heavy laden.***” You don’t need to unburden or collect yourself and then come to Jesus. Your very burden is what qualifies you to come. We project onto Jesus our skewed instincts about how the world works. Human nature dictates that the wealthier a person, the more they tend to look down on the poor. The more beautiful a person, the more they are put off by the ugly. ***And without realizing what we are doing, we quietly assume that one so high and exalted has corresponding difficulty drawing near to the despicable and unclean.*** Sure, Jesus

comes close to us, we agree—but He holds His nose. This assumption of subtle condemnation often is our reason for closing our heart, for keeping our cards close to our chest.

But to be approachable and accessible, as we see in Jesus, is to be non-judgmental. To not be critical. To not be focused on changing a person before first hearing them, empathizing with them, and loving them. When you consider Jesus, there are many examples of His humble and lowly approachableness:

- When speaking with the woman at the well, who had worked her way through five different husbands, Jesus wasn't quick to condemn, but to give grace and a way to eternal life.
- When surrounded by 5,000 hungry men, plus women and children, Jesus wasn't quick to condemn them for failing to bring a packed lunch. Instead, he has compassion on the crowds and makes a way to provide food.
- After Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus mercifully met him for a meal on the beach, never bringing up Peter's failure, only reaffirming His love for Him.

It's no wonder the crowds all flocked to Jesus, especially those in need of healing – they knew they wouldn't be condemned, but given mercy! When the many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus, Jesus said to the disgusted Pharisees, ***“Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” This means that the way we approach Jesus is not based on our good deeds, namely our sacrifices done in His name; no, our way we approach Jesus is based on His mercy!***

It's no wonder Jesus Himself said in John 3:17, ***“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”***

What makes a person approachable is their gracious spirit to help the sin struggles of others, not condemn them. It doesn't mean we forfeit the truth or compromise the truth, but when it comes time to share hard truth, we do it in love.

Speaking to the dads in the room, being one myself, if there is a tension or a brokenness in your relationship with your kids, especially your boys, ***might it be because you've often acted out of a critical spirit rather than a gracious spirit?*** Could it be that you've been quicker to point a finger than to embrace with a hug? Isn't it easier to convey to your boy that he's falling short of your standards than to keep your mouth shut and gently help him find his next step forward? Isn't it easier to lash out in a rage, even over a simple accident, than to consider the wisdom of Proverbs 15:1 - ***"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."***

We then wonder why our kids don't come to us more often, but instead find comfort in others. We wonder what went wrong and why they've grown emotionally cold toward us, sometimes deserting the faith or venturing off to fail or succeed all on their own. What's often resulted is a ***"father wound:"*** A deep emotional pain in our children that results in low self-esteem and a performance orientation that makes them doers far more than beings.

I surely don't leave myself out of this issue. Having three young boys of my own, I know the frustration I sometimes feel in my flesh to let them have it for their failure or their senseless immaturity. But then I'm so convicted by the heart of Jesus that said, ***"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."*** Jesus, like us, knows the Scripture that says, ***"Foolishness is bound up the heart of a child,"*** but that never stopped the unconditional outpouring of His love. ***For Jesus, forgiveness always trumps folly.*** As Romans 5:20 says, ***"Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."***

I am thoroughly convinced that the best dads are humble and gentle. It doesn't mean they're not powerful or fail to stand for the Truth. They know meekness doesn't equate with weakness. We know that Ephesians

6:4 says, *“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”* Whether you’re a dad, a mom, a son, or daughter, it could be that God is calling you to check your spirit.

I believe today could be a turning point for you: a day in which you will no longer judge according to what you see but according to what God sees. Remember, Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:16, based on the finished work of Christ, *“From now on, we regard no one according to the flesh.”* We now regard everyone, especially our own children, according to God’s love for us in Jesus. ***Our first response therefore shouldn’t be a harsh spirit, but a kind and gentle spirit.***

This is what will define us as approachable people. It’s what will define us as gentle people, following the example of gentleness in Jesus.

3. Affectionate: Compassionately responding with kindness.

But moving to our final point of the morning, we’ve looked at the qualities of being aware and approachable, ***but the last quality of a gentle spirit is that of being affectionate. This is a call for us to compassionately respond with kindness.***

What we see so clearly in our passage in Matthew 11 is that Jesus isn’t content with noticing those in need and inviting those in need to come near to Him. Jesus also has something He wants to do for those in need. What we see Jesus claim with His words in Matthew 11:29, we see Him prove with His actions time and again in all four Gospels. What He is, He does. He cannot act any other way. His life proves His heart.

When the leper says, *“Lord, if you will, you can make me clean,”* Jesus immediately stretches out His hand and touches him, with the words, *“I will; be clean.”* The word “will” in both the leper’s request and in Jesus’ answer is the Greek word for wish or desire. The leper was asking about Jesus’ greatest desire. And Jesus revealed His greatest desire by healing him.

When a group of men brings their paralyzed friend to Jesus, Jesus cannot even wait for them to ask for what they want—“When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, *“Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven”* (Matt 9:2). Before they could open their mouths to ask for help, Jesus couldn’t stop Himself—words of reassurance and calm tumbled out.

Traveling from town to town, *“He saw the crowds, and He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless”* (Matt 9:36). So He teaches them, and He heals their diseases. ***Simply seeing the helplessness of the throngs, pity ignites in His heart.***

Time and again it is the morally disgusting, the socially reviled, the inexcusable and undeserving, who do not simply receive Christ’s mercy but to whom Christ most naturally gravitates. He is, by His enemies’ testimony, the “friend of sinners” (Lk 7:34).

When we take the Gospels as a whole and consider the composite picture given to us of who Jesus is, what stands out most strongly? Yes, He is the fulfillment of the OT hopes and longings. Yes, He is the one whose holiness causes even His friends to fall down in fear, aware of their sinfulness. Yes, He is a mighty teacher, one whose authority outstripped even that of the religious PhDs of the day. To diminish any of these is to step outside of vital historic orthodoxy.

But the dominant note left ringing in our ears after reading the Gospels, the most vivid and arresting element of His portrait, is the way the Holy Son of God moves toward, touches, heals, and embraces, and forgives those who least deserve it yet truly desire it. His most natural impulse, His most natural instinct, upon seeing the fallenness of the world all about Him, is to move toward that sin and suffering, not away from it. ***He is a God of affection, for merciful affections stream from His innermost heart as rays from the sun.***

And if Jesus is not going to those in need, He’s calling them to Himself. This is because He has something to offer them. Here in Matthew 11:28,

He says, *“Come to me...and I will give you rest.”* What Jesus specifically has to offer here is rest. This is not the rest we think of after a busy day at work, or the occasional greater escape of a vacation. His promise here is not “rest for our bodies,” but “rest for our souls.” This is a shalom-like wholeness that exhibits itself in fullness of peace. It has a Gospel root in the finished work of Christ that frees us from ever having to work again to gain right-standing before the mighty Judge of Heaven and earth. ***Christ offers us His rest because He now rests in the seated position at the right hand of the throne of God.***

This rest Jesus offers is the outflowing of His affectionate kindness. The notion of kindness is right here in our passage. The word translated “easy” in His statement, *“My yoke is easy,”* needs to be carefully understood. Jesus is not saying life is free of pain or hardship. This is the same word elsewhere translated “kind” – as in, for example, Ephesians 4:32: *“Be kind to one another, teanderhearted.”*

Consider what Jesus is saying. A yoke is the heavy crossbar laid on oxen to force them to drag farming equipment through the field. Jesus is using a kind of irony, saying that the yoke laid on His disciples is a non-yoke. For it is a yoke of kindness. Who could resist this? It’s like telling a drowning man that he must put on the burden of a life preserver only to hear him shout back, sputtering, “No way! Not me! This is hard enough, drowning here in these stormy waters. The last thing I need is the added burden of a life preserver around my body!” That’s what we are like, confessing Christ with our lips but generally avoiding deep fellowship with Him, out of a muted understanding of His heart.

His yoke is kind and His burden is light. That is, His yoke is a non-yoke, and His burden is a non-burden. What helium does to a balloon, Jesus’ yoke does to His followers. We are buoyed along in life by His endless affection. He doesn’t simply meet us at our place of need; He lives in our place of need. He never tires of sweeping us into His tender embrace. It is His very heart. It is what gets Him out of bed in the morning.

It's this same heart of affection that should define our gentleness toward others. Just like Jesus, we should affectionately move toward, and not away, from those in need. Because we are in Jesus, because we have His Spirit, and because we know His Truth, we too have something to offer others in need. This same rest, when manifested in our lives, presents an attractiveness. It's why others come to us, making us approachable, and it's why we out to them, making us affectionate.

I wonder who the one person is in your life that you tend to move away from. This may be because of their self-centeredness, their harsh disposition, or their significant needs that seem too overwhelming to address. Here's the KEY APPLICATION QUESTION from this message: ***How might the heart of Jesus toward you change your heart toward them?***

COMMUNION

As we close today, we've considered God's supreme heart of gentleness toward us. It's taught us that those desiring a gentle spirit must be:

- **Aware**: Sensitively perceiving the needs and feelings of others.
- **Approachable**: Graciously receiving others just as they are.
- **Affectionate**: Compassionately responding with kindness.

Jesus is our example, and since He says in our passage, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden," it's only appropriate that we do so now by coming to Him at the communion table. It's here that we come face-to-face with the heart of Jesus as gentle and lowly. He was aware of our need, and decided to do something about it. He came down to associate with us, the lowly, not aiming to condemn us, but to save us. And He demonstrated His affection by going to cross on our behalf, taking upon Himself the wrath brought on by our sins, thus making peace by His cross.

Oh, church, His cross is what makes Him so approachable and therefore so gentle in regard to sinners. When you take the bread and the cup, you

can bring before Him any problem, any sin failure, any hardness of your heart. He not only welcomes this, but it's His heart's passion to do so!

CLOSING PRAYER

BENEDICTION

Ephesians 4:1-3: *"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*