

“What Do You Want to Be Like When You Grow Up?—Gentleness and Self-Control”

The question of this series has been, “What do you want to be like when you grow up?” The Apostle Paul gives us this list of qualities, or characteristics, and the idea is that as we grow up we are to cultivate these things. **“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).** The idea is that God does his part in planting the seeds of these things, and we do our part in nurturing them and cultivating them. The idea is that we don’t just drift into these very important characteristics, but we partner with God, we do our part of the work, we see the results. If we don’t do our part of the work, we drift. And the drift is never into a good place. The drift is always into characteristics that have regrettable results.

Let’s talk about gentleness. The Greek word for gentleness can also be translated as humility, or as meekness. This is a really important word. But we have to be careful with it because in our culture it can take on the meaning of being spineless, or mamby-pamby, or weak. But listen, Moses, in the Old Testament was called meek, but he was the most amazing, powerful man, in the whole Old Testament. Jesus was called gentle and meek, and yet he was about the strongest human being you’d ever meet. Someone once said that **Meekness is velvet-covered steel.** When it comes to our character it means being strong and powerful, but covered in something soft. You might put it this way, **Gentleness is strength under control.**

Gentleness is a trait that we’re to cultivate in our words. Proverbs 15:1 says this, **“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).** We live in a confrontational world where we seem to always go toward, “I’m going to get you back. I’m going to even the score. You’re going to get a letter from my attorney!” Words like that immediately put the other person in a fighting stance. Words like that just open the door to more anger. But a gentle answer opens up the possibility of other responses. A gentle answer opens up the possibility of healing and resolution, instead of just more conflict. Now, a gentle answer isn’t always a guarantee that resolution will happen or that the other person won’t get angry. But a gentle answer opens up the possibility to stop the conflict.

The Apostle Paul put it this way in Ephesians as he talks about the power of our words. He says, **“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:29-32).**

When my kids look back at me, I want them to be able to say, “My dad was firm and loving. Strong and gentle. His words guided me and built me up and never degraded me or tore me down. Even when he was mad he tried to show gentleness.” Now, my kids will tell you that’s not what I do all the time, but I’m working on it, and what I want to be like when I grow up, is to have increasing amounts of gentleness. I want the same to be said of me by the people I worked with, the people I pastored.

Let’s talk about anger for a minute. Because if you cultivate the fruit of the Spirit of gentleness, that does not mean that you never get angry. I found one definition of gentleness, meekness, that put it this way. **Gentleness is always being angry at the right time and never being angry at the wrong time.** So what is the right time and the wrong time? It has to do with selfish anger versus selfless anger. When we get all bent out of shape because we don’t get our way, that is selfish anger. But when we get angry about an injustice, when we get angry about the mistreatment of people, when we get angry about oppression, or poverty, that can change the world.

People showing anger at the right time is what ended child labor. It’s what led to the end of slavery in the U.S. Anger at the right time is what led to the civil rights movement. This kind of anger against injustice and oppression has led people to give their lives to helping people overcome, to lifting people up. Gentleness isn’t spinelessness, it’s strength under control. It’s knowing the right time to be angry.

And another way to define this fruit of the spirit of **Gentleness is humility**. And humility is vital for a life of spiritual growth and spiritual maturity. Because if you don't have humility you can't learn anything. You can't be taught anything if you think you already know it all.

Without humility you'll never know love. It's an act of humility to admit, "I cannot be fully alive with the love that I can generate for myself. I need the love of others, I need the love of God."

Without humility you can't be a follower of Jesus. Because humility is recognizing your own weakness, it's recognizing your need for God. It takes humility to say, "God is God, and I am not. And I need God's presence, God's love, God's forgiveness in my life." Humility leads us to a place where you can be honest with God when you fail, knowing that he's the only source of forgiveness; that we need a Savior. Without humility we end up dragging around shame, and sin, and all kinds of other junk.

I asked some of the staff, "Who comes to mind when you think of gentleness?" They named a few people; the first one was Anna Jean Dye, our retired Director of Caring Ministries. She lives out this trait of giving gentle answers. She lives out this sense of being angry over the right things, and never over the wrong things. She lives out this sense of humility—being teachable, and ready to receive God's grace and forgiveness, and give God's grace and forgiveness. She's truly gentle, but at the same time very, very strong. The thing about this gentleness and meekness is that when it's present in us, we become people of power and presence.

Let's talk about self-control. From talking to a bunch of people about this, self-control seems to be the fruit of the Spirit that most people say they struggle with—that and patience. When I talked about patience a few weeks ago I said that I am a very patient person, except when I'm not. And I am a very self-controlled person, except when I'm not.

Since January I've really been trying to watch what I eat. I've lost some weight in the process and I'd like to keep it off now that I'm in my mid thirties—today is my birthday. When it comes to food, I can do pretty good most of the time.

But two weeks ago the Dahms invited Janet and me to dinner. Our seminary intern, Jacob Schneider, has been living with them this summer and he is like the grill master. And he made this amazing pulled pork. The kind you have to slow cook for hours. The whole meal was heavenly. Pulled pork, fresh baked rolls, homemade potato salad, baked beans, homemade pickles, sweet corn casserole, fresh veggies from Art's garden—tomatoes, cucumbers, kohlrabi, radishes. It was amazing. I had seconds. I had thirds. Then dessert. Homemade ice cream with fresh blue berries and strawberries. I had two bowls of ice cream. I've been talking about that meal since then.

Then on the Thursday after that we had some old friends come into town and we grilled shrimp and chicken and did cheese fondue. You know you dip chunks of bread, and broccoli, and cauliflower, and carrots in cheese. Lots of cheese. And then for dessert, chocolate fondue. We dipped angel food cake, and strawberries, and bananas.

On Saturday friends had us over for plank grilled salmon, fresh green beans with bacon, corn on the cob, pasta salad, hot rolls, and New York Cheesecake for dessert. Deeeelicious.

On Sunday night we hosted our small group at our house. Burgers and hotdogs, baked beans, Asian cabbage salad, potato chips, and chocolate cake...and strawberry cake...I had both. Really, I'm not obsessed with food! Like I said, I've got lots of self-control...until I don't.

Doug Fields proposes that one reason we struggle with self-control is because we have pain in life from the past and the present and when we have pain we want to feel better so we reach for medicators to do that. Some of us reach for food. Or alcohol. Or shopping. Or drugging. Or sexing. Or working. Or busying. Whatever it is – to make that pain go away. These medicators are only temporary fixes, but we think that temporary is better than nothing at all so we use them over and over again...until at some point these medicators become things we can't control anymore. In fact they begin to control us.

The good news is that God deeply cares about your pain. He cares so much that he said, "I want to develop in you self-control so you don't have to be dominated and defeated by those things that make you miss out on living life to its fullest."

The word “self-control” in the Bible in the Greek language means a couple of different things. First it means to **Exercise moderation in regards to desires and pleasure**. Ben Franklin coined the phrase, “Moderation in all things.” He didn’t practice that, but he coined the phrase. Self-control in the Bible also means **Having power over your desires or emotions so you don’t become slaves to them**. In both of these we see the idea of an inner strength that keeps us from falling prey to our desires.

Proverbs 25 puts it this way: **“A person without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken down walls” (Proverbs 25:28)** The image here is that of a city whose walls have been destroyed to the point that they’re no defense against enemies. In this sense walls are good things. Things that help us stay protected so we don’t lose what is of real value—our lives and the lives of those we love. Self control is a protective wall so that our temptations don’t take over our lives and God wants this for you and me.

So why do we struggle so much with self-control? One reason is that **Self-control must always be on**. That self-control switch always has to be on in your life. This is hard because it means that we always have to exert some self-control in how we think and what we say and what we do. Right now during this message, you are exerting some self-control by not making noise, or talking out loud, or walking out on me. No matter where we are self-control is always on.

As I stand on stage I have to have self-control. There are thoughts that come to my mind that I don’t say. When I see people fall asleep or constantly coming or going I want to say something. I was a real hyperactive kid growing up and I would just blurt things out and do things. I offended a lot of people. So now I expend a great deal of energy trying to be a good boy. This, for me, is an exercise of self-control.

Self-control must always on. And this can be a problem because when something is always on, it can tire out. We can take it for granted. It can run down. And we can end up turning it off when we need it most.

Another reason we struggle with self control is that **Temptation is always there**. Think about the ways we medicate our hurts. We can access that medication any place we want. Maybe you’d say, “Shopping is my deal. I can’t control my shopping. I like to spend.” Temptation is everywhere. You go in a big mall and it’s filled with little shops. Then you walk out of the little shops and there’s a little kiosk or wagon-thingy that will take your money. When the stores close then you can go home and you can shop on TV because there are 50 shopping channels. And if you don’t want to do the shopping channels you can go to the Internet and shop for 24 hours a day. You might as well go through life pinning money onto your clothes and saying, “Take it. Take it. Take it.” Everywhere you go shopping is there.

What about food? Food is a medicator. This one doesn’t seem fair. I mean, we’ve got to eat to survive! But if food is your gig, then everywhere you go there’s something to eat. I watched a special a while back on America’s problem with food. One of the problems is that we no longer have certain times and places that we eat. The etiquette that once told us that you eat at these times and in these places has been thrown out the window. Food is available at all times and it’s ok to eat it anywhere any time, even if it means putting your life in danger eating that McRib while traveling down the interstate at 75 miles an hour! Food is always available and it’s acceptable to eat it almost anywhere.

What about pornography. The last I heard, there are over 4 million pornographic websites. Twelve percent of all websites are pornographic. 25% of all search engine requests are for some sort of pornography. This is a big deal and a lot of times we don’t want to talk about it. But it’s messing with men and an increasing number of women. It makes them feel ashamed, and it makes them feel like God can’t use them, so they pull away from God, the church, their faith. This is a problem because you’re always just a couple of mouse clicks away from delving into a fantasy world that is very seductive and addicting. My point is this. You don’t have to search very far for the temptations in today’s world. They’re everywhere.

This would be a good time to talk about **The 5 R’s of resisting temptation**. When facing temptation **REMEMBER** who you are - you are a child of God and a follower of Jesus Christ! Romans 6 says, **“Sin is no longer your master...Instead you are free by God’s grace” (Romans 6:14)**. I’m no longer a slave to sin and God has given me the authority to win. If you forget everything I you’ve heard today, don’t forget this.

Because of God's grace—his undeserved love for me—I don't have to be dominated by a life of sin. I am free. I am no longer a slave to that sin.

RECOGNIZE the consequences of your action - will you feel better or worse afterwards? Who might be hurt or helped? Will you glorify God? Will you separate yourself from God? Etc.

REDIDICATE yourself to God through prayer - stop, in the midst of the temptation, and pray, asking for God's help and strength.

REVEAL your struggle to a trusted friend who will hold you accountable. When your temptation is no longer a secret, it loses some of its power. And those trusted friends can give guidance and direction. Proverbs puts it this way, "**Fools think they need no advice but the wise listen to others.**" (**Proverbs 12:15**).

REMOVE yourself from the situation - when you know there is a situation in which you are tempted, plan to avoid the situation.

Ultimately if you want complete self-control, you have to give up all control. It's one of those upside down God things. If you want self-control then give up all control. When I allow God in to my life fully, then he brings in, and begins to develop self-control in me. He begins to heal the pain, he brings the strength to say "no" to things that will harm me.

Galatians 2: "**I have been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me**" (**Galatians 2:19-20**).

As a pastor, people tell me their stories of when they have failed when it comes to self-control. And the stories are painful. But when I hear those stories of pain I try to be the presence of Christ to that person which to me means holding them accountable for their actions, and at the very same time, offering huge amounts of grace. That's what Jesus did over and over. He didn't let people off the hook for their sin, but he offered forgiveness and grace. If your self control should fail and you fall, you get back up, you dust yourself off, you receive the gift of grace, and you try again. And you never give up. And in the journey you get stronger, and self control grows.

When it comes to self control Paul's prayer Ephesians 3 is my prayer for you and myself, "**I pray that from his glorious unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love and may you have the power to understand how wide, how long, how high and how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ and then you'll be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God**" (**Ephesians 3:16-19, NLT**). It's all about God's love controlling me so that I have the inner strength to control the other things in my world.

What do you want to be like when you grow up? No matter how old you are, you can still become more of what God created you to be. A person with growing evidence of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That's my prayer for you and for me and for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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