Galatians 5:19-25 *The Fruit of the Spirit: Gentleness*

***Kumquats***I want you to imagine that you are making a run to the grocery store. This will be easier for some of you than others. Personally, I try to avoid going to the grocery store as much as possible. I’m just not very good at knowing where things are. I can stare at the same shelf, marked “snacks”, for five minutes and still not see the can of mixed nuts. It’s not till I finally break down and ask for help that I find out that I’m in the “sweet snacks” aisle and there’s a whole different aisle for “salty snacks.” So, I’m not very good in a grocery store.

But, imagine that you are making a run to the grocery store and on your list you have an entry marked “fruit.” What kinds of fruit are you going to buy? I’m guessing that, if you are like most people, you’re going to get the old stand-bys: apples, oranges, bananas, that sort of thing. If it’s in season, you might grab some watermelon or strawberries or peaches.

But there are probably some fruits in the produce aisle that are not going to leap to mind. There are some fruits that, quite frankly, we just don’t think about that much. So, for example, show of hands, how many of you, when you shop for fruit, regularly purchase figs? Anybody? Fig Newtons don’t count. I’m talking about the actual fruit. Or, again, how many of you buy dates? You know what I mean, the fruit, not somebody to go to the movie with you. Any date eaters here? Or, how about kumquats? If your grocery list said “fruit”, how many of you would come home with kumquats?

I don’t even know if you can find kumquats at any of the stores in Spencer. I don’t know if I’ve ever had a kumquat. I looked it up on the internet and found out it is a tiny little citrus fruit that **sort resembles an orange**.

My point is: there are some forgotten fruits out there. Figs and dates and kumquats are legitimate fruits, but they rarely make our shopping lists. We just haven’t developed much of an appetite for them.

And when I think about the fruit of the Spirit that we’re going to be talking about this week—gentleness—I think we could kind of classify it that way, it’s kind of a forgotten fruit.

We’re in this series based on **Galatians 5:22-23**, the Fruit of the Spirit. And so far, I’ve resisted the temptation to match each of these characteristics with an actual fruit. I’m afraid we would start to strain the analogy. But if you wanted to think of some of the early items on the list—love, joy, peace, patience—they’re kind of the biggies that we are always praying for and on the look out for. Those are kind of the traditional fruits—oranges and bananas and grapes. And last week, we talked about how we sort of take faithfulness for granted whenever it shows up, so maybe you could compare it to an apple. The fruit that we just expect to be there.

But gentleness is different. I don’t know that we spend a lot of time praying for God to make us more gentle. I don’t know that we think a lot about becoming more gentle. In fact, I don’t know if we even have that much of an appetite for gentleness in our lives. And in that sense, it’s kind of the kumquat of this list.

***Power Under Control***When you think about it, gentleness just doesn’t jump out at you as a way to describe yourself. How many of you, if you were filling out a resume, would use “gentle” as a word to describe yourself? You wouldn’t, would you? You want words like “go-getter” and “high-achiever” and “determined” and “driven.” Gentle doesn’t get that across. Or, if you were running for office, can you imagine using “gentle” in your campaign slogan? “Elect Dave: He’s gentle.”

I looked the word “gentle” up in an online Thesaurus, and here are some of the words that came up: “benign,” “affable,” “soft,” “placid,” “docile.” And then there’s this one: “domesticated.” Who wants to be described as domesticated?

Gentleness just isn’t something we desire or aspire to in our lives. I heard this week about a survey the Barna group did. They listed 30 different character traits from the Bible. 30 different things that the Bible says should be true of us if we follow Jesus. And then they went out and asked a bunch of Christians to rank those characteristics in terms of how important they were. And you know what came in dead last? 30th out of 30? Gentleness.

Like I said, gentleness is kind of the kumquat on this list. It sounds weak. Wimpy. Gentle people are not people who get ahead.

And yet, gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit. It is something the Bible says should characterize us if we are following Jesus. It is something the Spirit desires to develop in us. So, let’s see if we can understand a little better what the Bible is talking about.

The word that is translated as “gentleness” is the same word Jesus uses in the Beatitudes when He says that the “meek…will inherit the earth.” (Matt. 5:5) Gentleness, meekness. Same word. It’s the Greek word “***prautes***.” I couldn’t think of any English words that are derived from this Greek word, but I learned that there is a neat word picture behind it.

*Prautes* is the word that the Greeks would have used to describe a wild horse that had been broken and trained. It’s one of the secondary meanings of our word “gentle” still today. When you gentle a horse that means that you have gotten it to accept the bridle, put the bit in its mouth, so now you can give the reins to a rider and that horse can be guided and turned. Gentleness, then, is “**power under control**.” It’s the strength and wild energy of a horse harnessed and put to the benefit of someone else.

With that word picture gentleness doesn’t seem so wimpy, does it?

Another good way to understand gentleness is to talk about what it is not. We can look at the opposite of gentleness. And the fruit of the Spirit passage can help us with that. If you remember, right before Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, he gives another list he calls “the acts of the sinful nature.” And in that list, he includes something he calls **“fits of rage.”** Fits of rage is pretty much the opposite of gentleness.

What are fits of rage? The New Living Translation has “outbursts of anger.” So, while gentleness is having your power under control, fits of rage would be having your anger, your irritation, your agitation right under the surface so that nobody ever really knows when it is going to burst out. It’s like the creature in *Alien*, right? Nobody knows when it is going to burst out and hurt somebody.

A person without gentleness, then, is a person who tends to be very defensive. People like this are hyper-sensitive to every comment. “Honey, could you go out back and check on the kids?” “What?! You think I never pay attention to the kids? You think I’m lazy?” “No… I just thought since you were close to the screen door you could take a quick look…”

Or, again, people without gentleness can be constantly critical. They never see anything good. They don’t know how to give a compliment. They love to point out every flaw.

Or, again, people like this seem like they are in a perpetually bad mood. Always a scowl on their face. The co-worker that people just avoid. The parent who seems like a volcano, you never know when they are going to go off. Some of you grew up in homes like this: one minute everything is calm, the next minute mom is yelling and dad is shouting. A constant minefield.

And, one more, people who are lacking in gentleness tend to come off like a bully. We hear a lot about bullying these days, and rightfully so. There are people who love to verbally and physically intimidate other people. People who make themselves feel bigger by chopping other people down. That’s the opposite of gentleness. That’s fits of rage. Outbursts of anger.

So gentleness is one of the more overlooked fruits of the Spirit. But we could all probably stand to grow in gentleness. It’s one of those traits where we become much more likable the more we show it.

Let me give my definition of gentleness, then. Keeping in mind the word picture of taming a horse and getting power under control; and keeping in mind the opposite, fits of rage and outbursts of anger; I’m going to say that **gentleness is handling others with care.** Gentleness is treating others like they are precious and valuable and you don’t want to break them.

The movie scene that was in my head all week is the scene from a *Christmas Story*, when the Old Man wins his big prize and it finally gets delivered in a big wooden crate. After they wrestle the box into the house, he reads what it says: “Fra-gee-lay! It must be Italian!” And his wife goes, “I think that says “fragile.”” And, of course, the prize is that tacky lamp shaped like a woman’s leg.

But “fragile” is something we ought to see every time we see another person. If we are growing in gentleness, we should see “handle with care.”

I’ve got three parts to the sermon today: we should cultivate gentleness, we should emulate gentleness, and we should demonstrate gentleness.

***Walking with the Spirit***First, we should **cultivate gentleness.** That is to say, we should see gentleness as something that we can grow in.

Cultivate is a word that I’ve used throughout this series. The idea is that these fruits of the Spirit really only come into our lives when the Holy Spirit grows and develops them. They are fruits OF the Spirit. But, at the same time, I’ve been saying that there are things we can do to help create the conditions in which they will grow. We can cultivate. We can pull the weeds of fits of rage, we can water with God’s Word, and so on.

And here, I’m using the word cultivate to remind us that gentleness is an area that we CAN grow in. Because here, probably more than anywhere else on this list, we tend to make excuses about why we are not gentle people.

We say things like: “Well, that’s just not my personality. I’m more of a Type A personality. I tell it like it is. I don’t have much of a filter. Take it or leave it.” Or, maybe, we’ve never really had gentleness modeled for us. Like I said before, maybe you grew up in a home where fits of rage were the norm, so you just really don’t know how to be gentle.

Frankly, gentleness is not my strongest character trait. I’m highly competitive. I’ve got an outspoken nature. I’m not afraid to get into an argument, and if I am in an argument I want to win.

But, here’s the thing—I heard Kyle Idleman say this in a sermon this week and I think it is something we need to hear—"you can use your background or your personality type as an explanation for struggle, but you cannot use it as an excuse to sin.” <https://www.southeastchristian.org/sermons/time-to-grow/gentleness-when-you-re-mistreated/>

I think that is so good. I can say that my personality is more Type A, that I have a tendency to say it as I see it, but that is no excuse for me being a jerk. It might explain why I sometimes put my foot in my mouth, but it doesn’t excuse the hurt I cause when I am indifferent to someone else’s feelings.

And the deal is: this is not a hard-wired personality trait that can never be changed. The whole point of “gentleness” being included in the list of the fruits of the Spirit is to say that this is something the Holy Spirit can develop in us. It’s something He wants to develop in us. We’re not victims of our DNA in this case. We are not doomed to repeat the mistakes of our parents. We can cultivate gentleness in our lives.

How do we do that? Just like all the things on this list, we grow them by walking with the Spirit. Remember the verse right after the fruit of the Spirit in **Galatians 5:25:**

**25**Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

When we walk with the Spirit, and we are conscious of surrendering this area of our lives to the Spirit, we can and will see growth.

It might be awkward at first. It might not always seem natural. But if we are paying attention and following the Sprit’s lead we can begin to learn the steps to being more gentle people.

Lee Strobel is the man who wrote “The Case for Christ,” which was made into a movie last spring. He was a journalist who was pretty put out when he learned his wife was going to church. So, in an effort to prove to her how foolish she was being, he put his journalistic skills to work to disprove Christianity. But, in the process of investigating Jesus, he became convinced the Bible was true and surrendered his life to Christ. Here’s what he wrote:

How can I tell you the difference God has made in my life? My daughter Allison was 5 years old when I became a follower of Jesus, and all she had known in those five years was a dad who was profane and angry. I remember I came home one night and kicked a hole in the living room wall just out of anger with life. I am ashamed to think of the times Allison hid in her room to get away from me.

Five months after I gave my life to Jesus Christ, that little girl went to my wife and said, "Mommy, I want God to do for me what he's done for Daddy." At age 5! What was she saying? She'd never studied the archeological evidence. All she knew was her dad used to be this way: hard to live with. But more and more her dad is becoming this way. And if that is what God does to people, then sign her up. At age 5 she gave her life to Jesus.

God changed my family. He changed my world. He changed my eternity.

Gentleness is something you can grow in. It is something the Holy Spirit wants to produce in your life.

***Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild***Second, we should **emulate gentleness**. That is to say, we should see that Jesus was the gentlest person who ever lived.

Now, think about that. Think about who Jesus is: He is the very image of God, the radiance of God’s glory. He was there at the beginning, it is by His power and agency that the world began. He is the sustainer of creation. With a simple snap of His fingers He can bring history to a close. The book of Revelation describes Him—as He will be like at His second coming—with blazing eyes and sword for a tongue. He is the most powerful man to ever walk the face of this earth, with the ability to calm a storm with a word and to multiply loaves of bread thousands of times over. He cast demons into pigs. He took on death and walked out of His own grave.

And yet, this same Jesus, describes Himself like this in **Matthew 11:28-30:**

**28**“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. **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. **30**For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Jesus describes Himself as “gentle and humble in heart.” And He backed it up too! Remember the story with the children? A busy day of ministry, the disciples are worn out and frazzled, they’re trying to protect Jesus from the crowds, but these pesky kids keep hanging around Him. Have you ever noticed how animals and small children know instinctively who is gentle and who is not? These kids want to be around Jesus, but the disciples see them as a nuisance. So, what does Jesus say: “Let the little children come to me.” (Matthew 19:4)

Or, what about the woman caught in adultery? All these men with rocks in their hands, ready to expose her sin and exercise their brand of frontier justice. And how does Jesus handle it? He tells them that the one without sin should throw the first stone. And after they all slink away in shame, He says to the woman: “Neither do I condemn you, go now and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:11) As gentle as can be.

All you have to do is look at Jesus to do away forever with the notion that meekness is weakness. Jesus—the one who chased the money changers out of the temple—proves that you don’t have to be jelly to be gentle. He is the ultimate example of power under control. He showed us time and time again what it means to handle people with care.

Don’t be scared of being gentle. The one we worship as Savior and Lord is also the one we call gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

***Let Your Gentleness be Evident to All***Then, third, we should **demonstrate gentleness**. What I want to do now is a quick survey of some of the different places that the New Testament calls us to act with gentleness. Here are some practical examples of ways we should seek to be gentle.

We should seek **to speak with gentleness**. **1 Peter 3:15-16** says this:

**15**But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, **16**keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

Peter anticipates that there will be times when you are questioned about your faith. People are going to want to know why you believe what you believe. We’d like to hope that will be because they see something attractive in us. We hope that our light will be shining so brightly that people will just be so curious to know why we live such hopeful and joyful lives.

But the reality is, some people are going to question us from a position of skepticism. The people Peter wrote to were experiencing some tough persecution. People thought their beliefs were strange. The Greek word translated as “give an answer” is the word *apologia*. It’s where we get our word “apologize”, but also the word “apologetics”, which means to defend the Christian faith.

So, imagine that: imagine being in a position where people are questioning and tearing down your faith, maybe even mocking you for it. Maybe it’s malicious comment online in reaction to a picture of you wearing a Christian shirt, maybe it’s somebody taking a cheap shot at Jesus. In a situation like that, the temptation is going to be to respond with an outburst of anger. The desire is to put them in their place.

But Peter says: “be ready to give an answer—be ready to defend your faith—but do so with gentleness and respect.” Be gentle. Be respectful. Watch the words that you speak, and watch the way that you speak them.

You know—and this is something I need to be reminded of again and again—it’s possible to win an argument but lose somebody’s heart. You can be right, but the way you speak--the way you treat others in showing you are right--can just drive them further away. What’s the old saying? It’s not what you said, it’s how you said it. This can be true in the way we speak to our spouses, to our children, to our employees, and to people we want to share Jesus with.

So watch the way you speak. Be gentle with your words.

Or, again, we should **restore with gentleness.** **Galatians 6:1:**

 Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

Now, this isn’t some skeptic who doesn’t believe in God and wants nothing to do with Him. This verse here is talking about somebody in the church, someone who is following Christ, who messes up. This is somebody who has declared for Jesus, but they’ve strayed away. An affair happens. They can’t get their temper under control. They’ve been dipping into the till at work. What happens to that person?

Paul says that our goal as people living by the Spirit should be to restore that person. How? Gently. With gentleness. That should be our goal.

But all too often, that doesn’t happen. All too often, news of the scandal breaks and we in the church don’t know how to handle it. We get judgmental. We turn our backs. People don’t even want to tell us about their struggles with sin because they’re terrified that we’re going to freak out.

I’ve heard it said that the army of God is the only army in the world where they shoot their own wounded. It’s a big problem within the church. A big problem. Yes, we need to confront sin. Yes, we need to call it what it is. Yes, we need to hold one another accountable. But gently. Gently. Restore with gentleness.

And then, this, **shine with gentleness**. **Philippians 4:5:**

**5**Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

Gentleness ought to be a calling card of Christians. One of the evidences that we are following Jesus ought to be the gentleness we put on display. On the night before the cross, Jesus said to his followers “they’ll know you are my disciples by your love.” (John 13:35) Now, Paul is saying essentially the same thing to the Philippians, but slightly different. He’s saying: they’ll know you by your gentleness. They’ll recognize that you belong to Jesus because of the way you handle people with care.

And notice, he puts this in the context of Jesus coming again. He says: “The Lord is near.” He’s coming back, could be any moment. And when He comes back, do you want Him to find you in a fit of rage? Outbursts of anger and constant criticism? Or do you want Him to find you being gentle? Strength under control. Speaking to one another with care and respect. Emulating the one who was gentle and humble at heart.

Shine with gentleness. Let your gentleness be evident to all.

***The Plates***Finally, at my house we have two sets of dinnerware. We have the plain white bowls and plates. It’s Correlle. It stands up to the dishwasher. It can be banged around a little bit. It’s nothing fancy.

And then we have another set, the good stuff. This is stuff that we were given at our wedding. It’s got a pattern on it. It’s delicate. Call it the “fine China.” And at our house, it’s got two whole shelves at the top of our cupboard where it sits and we pretty much never use it. You know how that goes, right? It’s too pretty to use. It’s too easy to break. So this stuff occupies precious real estate in our kitchen cabinets and it only comes down for the really special occasions. Christmas dinner. Easter. Maybe if we have some really special guest coming over (and if you’ve been to my house, and we didn’t break out the fine China, well….)

We moved last year. And even though we hardly ever use the stuff, of course we carefully wrapped up all those fancy bowls and plates with newspaper, and we put it all into a special box, and then we wrote “fra-gee-lay” on the box and “handle with care.” Because, even though we don’t use it very much, we know we have to be careful with it…. [set plate down on table, but make sure it falls off and to the floor]

That wasn’t one of our plates. That came from the Market. $2.00. I had Beth pick that up for me this week, she knew I was going to break it. It wasn’t real.

But…for a moment…maybe some of you thought it was. There were some gasps. You were all looking for Beth to see how she would react.

Why? Because you see something that has value, even if it isn’t something that has value to you, and you see it damaged, and you feel bad. You know that we shouldn’t take something of value and be careless with it.

Now, think for just a moment, about how Jesus must feel when He sees us treating one another carelessly.

Think about how He feels about us. He made us in His image. He bought us with the price of His blood. He’s crazy about each and every person walking around on this planet.

So when He sees us treating one another clumsily. When He sees the fits of rage, the outbursts of anger. When we use criticism and sarcasm and name calling, when we yell or intimidate or push or shove, and when we do that towards His valued treasures, His creation, imagine how much that must grieve His heart. When we lash out at others we aren’t just hurting them, we’re hurting Him.

So keep in step with the Spirit. Let Him ripen His fruit in your life. Even the kumquats. And as you do, you will find that when you look at other people, you’ll see the label: “Fragile. Handle with Care.”