

FOTS - Wk 9

Gentleness > Harshness

10/10/21

Matthew 11

Introduction

Tim. Pastor. **Matthew 11:28-30** and **John 2:13-17**. Pray.

Just two weeks left in our series on the Fruit of the Spirit in a Time of the Flesh. Looking at these fruit of the Spirit - the characteristics of Jesus as we seek to become more and more like Him. I've heard some really great stories about what the Spirit is doing in our church family through this series:

- Friendships that have been reconciled
- Folks taking new steps towards fighting their sin
- Various ways our church community is pressing into Christ-likeness together

Two more weeks. Tonight → **Gentleness in a Time of Harshness**.

Harshness

Let's talk about **harshness**. **Harshness** for our purposes can be defined as **rough, jarring, mean-spirited, or cruel**.

To be harsh is to be either unaware or unconcerned about the impact of the force someone can exert on people and things around them.

We can be harsh in our **actions, certainly:**

- Abuse, mistreatment, fighting, physical violence. We see this across our country and city right now:
- Violent crime rates spiked across the US over the past 2 years. Right here in our city alone in 2020 we had our highest rate of homicides in over 20 years.
- We've seen violent protests across our nation as people with often valid pain and hurt have turned not towards the issue but towards each other.
- There are entire websites and tiktok trends and youtube accounts dedicated to fighting and violence.

But we also live in a time of harshness with our **words as well:**

- Social media and a 24-hour news cycle elevates the necessity of hot takes and harshness thrown at those who disagree with us or make us angry. We've lost the ability to be empathetic listeners who have face to face conversations.
- We're taught to respond to the harsh, cruel, and rough person in our lives with our own displays of self-assertiveness and aggression. You don't pray for, serve, forgive, or love someone who is mean to you - you cancel, you cut off, you put on blast.

I came across a quote from author John Seabrook that I thought really put words to the time of harshness that we live in. He said in an article titled "The Coarsening of Culture" - **"In a crowded marketplace, where everyone is trying to be heard and where there's an amazing number of choices, the loudest, coarsest, most shocking voice does tend to be the one that at least grabs your attention for a moment. And since moments are the currency within which modern media trade, that's all that really matters."**

If you want to be heard you have to be direct, harsh, and mean-spirited and say the unvarnished truth regardless of how it affects anyone else....so we're often taught and then rewarded for being harsh.

But this is nothing new to our day....In fact, in Ancient Rome during the time of Paul's writings - where he says that gentleness is the fruit of the Spirit → humility and gentleness were not virtues, they were actually considered vices. To the ancient Romans, gentleness was an immoral temptation that preyed upon the weak and the vulnerable. They thought a person who sought to be gentle was just giving in to laziness and passivity and weren't willing to fight for themselves.

Gentleness was not a marker they strived for, especially men. Real men were dominant. Real men were aggressive. Real men were violent and harsh. In fact, for some in the ancient Roman culture - boasting was a cultivated art form. They would have debates where the whole goal was to boast about yourself and your status in a more eloquent and convincing way than your opponent. Like old school rap battles, which I think is fascinating.

And so Paul warns the church at Galatia - this is off. Harshness, unhindered aggression, violence - this is not of the Spirit but of the flesh. Just a few verses before the fruit of the Spirit, in Galatians 5:15 Paul warns the church - **15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.** And then he tells them in verses 19-21 that the works of the flesh are evident, and goes on to list things like - enmity/hostility, strife, fits of anger, dissensions, and divisions - all aspects of harshness.

In the flesh - life apart from and in rebellion to God - we become marked by harshness.

- The parent who responds not with loving discipline, but in anger and ungodly frustration with their child.
- The friend who doesn't overlook or forgive the offensive but responds in malice seeking to "get even".
- The spouse who doesn't bear with the frustrating habits or tendencies of their husband or wife, but lashes out, critiques, or belittles.
- It's those of us who justify a coarse word with excuses like "I was just speaking my mind" or "they needed the honest truth" - when in reality we were hoping to not correct but to harm.

All of these are aspects of the work of the flesh of harshness. Roughness. Violence.

Passivity

But before we turn to gentleness, there's another layer to it that we have to address as well. And that is the prevailing unBiblical flipside of harshness, in which we think the proper response is that of **passivity**. In reaction to an environment or culture of harshness, violence, and aggression - we instead become passive.

And much of the sermon today is going to be honed in on this issue of passivity, because while harshness is certainly a problem, I think the majority of us in the room, myself included, are more in danger of this side of things. My concern is that many of us will walk away from this sermon on gentleness in a time of harshness feeling validated in our personality or posture when we shouldn't.

Because we have a false idea of gentleness in our society that equates gentleness with a personality trait or a demeanor that simply doesn't engage at all.

And we've called it gentleness when really it's unloving passivity, or fear, or self protection → We never respond. We never correct. We never stand up for ourselves or for what is right. We never disagree with anyone, at least not out loud. If everyone else is shouting at each other across the aisle, I'm just going to sit back and say nothing, and then take pride in that.

In fact, we've actually co-opted and started misusing these ideas of harshness and violence. So **tolerance** and **inclusivity** become the highest value of our day - therefore I'm never going to say anything that would disagree with you

because it would be harsh and unloving for me to disagree with your viewpoint or position, regardless of how I go about that disagreement.

Pastors. To be honest, this is what many in today's Christian culture expect in the gentleness of their pastors. Now let me say this clearly → when church leaders use the name of Jesus to manipulate, coerce, and abuse - that is evil and wicked. It's never ok in any sphere of influence, but especially for those of us within church leadership.

AND one of the fallouts from our tolerance culture that has the wrong view of gentleness and harshness is that we can equate any amount of spiritual authority, leadership, correction or rebuke from those God has put over us Biblically as lumped into this same category.

We can't throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Spiritual abuse is real and painful and wicked. And your pastor, or your Community Group leader, or a trusted Christian friend lovingly calling you out on sin, or trying to bring correction into your life, or showing you where you might be off and then clouded on that offness by sin is not harsh, unloving, or abuse.

In fact in Galatians 6:1, right after the fruit of the Spirit, Paul says → **Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.**

So there's this call that we are in each other's lives as believers, calling out sin, helping to fight temptation, restoring, loving.

Because while gentleness is certainly not harshness, unrestrained aggression, anger and vitriol... gentleness is also not passivity. It's not soft. It's not weak. It's not cowardly. That's a wrong view of gentleness as well. We need a better way than both of these.

Gentleness

So let's talk about the fruit of **Gentleness**. What is the way of Jesus in opposition to harshness and passivity. What does it mean to be gentle? If it's not weakness and passivity, what is it?

Paul in Galatians 5 says...."**22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.**"

That word Gentleness there in the text is the Greek word ***Prautes* - "gentleness, meekness, humility"**.

It was a word used in Ancient Greek literature to talk about the **taming** of wild animals or powerful beasts. If you were to get a lion or an ox under control and under your command - it would be considered *Prautes*.

So Biblical gentleness carries with it this idea not of weakness but of tamed strength.

Or as one pastor defined it - **Gentleness is the right stewardship of strength for love.**

Gentleness is stewarded strength. This is huge. This is the key to understanding the fruit of gentleness. It's not the absence of strength. It's not free wheeling, do whatever you want, strength. It's stewarded strength.

Father w/ his newborn. I think such a beautiful picture of this is a father with his newborn child. The early moments, days, weeks after birth and this dad takes this small, fragile human being and rests him/her on his chest. And in that moment the father has so much power. He could crush or mishandle the child. He could also become absent. But it's

gentleness not when the father gives up his power, but when the father in his power cares for the child - protects it, nurtures it, keeps it safe.

I think it's helpful to think in some categories (*how to know if it's gentle or not*):

- **Amount** → Gentleness is stewarded in the amount of strength that is needed. Gentleness knows how much push is needed in a particular situation and scenario. I think about this in particular when it comes to my kid - what is the appropriate amount of strength necessary for corrective discipline? What's that line? It's not nothing, it's also not all of my force.
- **Motivation** → What is the purpose behind my strength? Am I lovingly bringing sin up to my spouse because I want them to look more like Jesus or because it's annoying me? Am I after God's glory or my own self-protection or comfort?
- **Direction** → What is the direction of my strength? Am I serving or loving those in need? Am I directing my strength to protect those who need protection?

So think about this example of a father with His newborn child - He's using the right **amount** of strength, in the **direction** of his child, out of the **motivation** of love and care.

You have to have all three. You lack the right amount, right motivation, or right direction and it's not gentle. You can have the right motivations behind your use of strength and force in the situation, but use the wrong amount and lack gentleness. You can also use the right amount of force - you can be so winsome and kind, but do it for selfish reasons or motivations - and that is also not gentle.

Gentleness is the right stewardship of strength for love.

Gentleness is not giving up your power, it's not the over assertion of your power, it's the redirection of your power in love and service to those in need.

Jesus

This is why, as I want to show us now as we turn to the Scriptures - there can be what seems like tension in the life of Jesus. Where in **Matthew 11** (our first passage) Jesus can describe Himself as gentle and lowly in heart, and yet in **John 2** (our second passage) overturn tables in the temple and drive out folks with a whip. And both can be Him being Biblically gentle.

In fact as we look at the tension of these passages we see the fruit of gentleness in the life of Jesus as a means of grace for pushing against both sides of our flesh - whether we lean towards harshness or towards passivity, or towards both depending on the area of our lives.

HARSHNESS

So let's first look at **Matthew 11:28-30** and I want to speak for a few minutes to those of us who lean towards harshness.

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."

Many of us over the fall are reading through a book called *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund, which is based around these 3 verses. In the book Dane points out something that really hit me and was something I honestly hadn't thought

about before. He talks about how in all 4 gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), this is the only time where Jesus describes his heart to people. The heart in this culture was not simply your emotional system but the driving force in your life. And this is the only place in all of His teachings where Jesus describes the core of who He is and He says it with two words - **Gentle and Lowly.**

Dane says it this way - **“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 of 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.’”**

This is at the core of who Christ is → That He is gentle. He is *praus*. He has restrained strength in service for others.

And the invitation from Christ’s gentleness, from his lowliness (which means his accessibility to us) is that God would take on flesh and invite us to come to Him.

He says to all of us who **labor** - who are working to try to prove ourselves, earn something for ourselves, validate ourselves before God and others - come to me.

He says to all of us who are **heavy laden** - who are suffering, hurting, feeling cast aside and burdened and overwhelmed by the pains of this life - come to me.

Will you just try for a moment to take off the church glasses for a second and hear how shocking of an invitation this is. Jesus Christ. Fully God. Savior and King. Ruling and reigning over all things and all people - invites us to come to Him. Invites us to draw near.

And a large part of us loves that invitation, wants that invitation, and yet there’s something within us that recoils at it too. There’s something within me that wants to push back, wants to justify, wants to not accept it.

And so we labor and become heavy laden - proving ourselves to the world, proving ourselves to our families, proving ourselves to ourselves, proving ourselves to God. Going through life, hands up, ready to fight, ready to lash out, ready to reach with harshness, anger, aggression, and violence.

We have not received the invitation from Jesus to put down our striving, put down our boxing gloves, put down our trying to rule and reign our lives, put down trying to earn and prove ourselves and receive from Him - and receive from His rest and gentleness and lowliness - we cannot extend the same gentleness to others. So we become harsh people.

- We’re harsh in the **amount** of force. We’ve gone overboard, we’ve turned good things we’re trying to say into personal attacks or overdrawn aggression.
- Or we’re harsh in **motivation** behind it - self-defense, self-exaltation, idolatry of power.
- Or we’re harsh in the **direction** - wrong person at the wrong time.

And let me put it as clearly as I can - if the call for us as followers of Jesus is to become like Christ (which is the whole argument of the series), and Christ is gentle and lowly - your harshness is not a personality trait or a part of your wiring, or a small mental lapse in judgment, or just the result of your family of origin - it is sin. **It is of the flesh and worthy of repentance.**

And Jesus to our harshness comes with a beautiful invitation → He offers us a gift of rest. A gift of grace. To receive not His harshness, not His aggression, not His roughness, but His gentleness. His gentle and lowly heart.

Dane Ortlund again - "You don't need to unburden or collect yourself and then come to Jesus. Your very burden is what qualifies you to come. No payment is required; he says, "I will give you rest." His rest is gift, not transaction. Whether you are actively working hard to crowbar your life into smoothness ("labor") or passively finding yourself weighed down by something outside your control ("heavy laden"), Jesus Christ's desire that you find rest, that you come in out of the storm, outstrips even your own."

He goes on to say that the most natural posture of Jesus is not a pointed finger, but open arms.

So we receive the gentle and lowly, tender heart of Christ for us, and we allow Him to change us and shape us to be more gentle like Him. That's the good news of Christ for our harshness.

PASSIVITY

But what about our passivity? Turn over to John 2. This is a story included in all 4 of the gospels, emphasizing different viewpoints but probably the same event. This is how John tells it:

John 2:13-17

13 The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. 15 And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. 16 And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade." 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Do you see the gentleness of Jesus?

Alright let me make sure we're clear on what's happening here and why Jesus is so upset: During the time of Passover Jews from all over would travel to Jerusalem to worship God and offer sacrifices. And these people have set up shop trying to make some money at the expense of these folks - maybe they forgot their dove they were supposed to sacrifice...sure you can buy one from me! They were co-opting a space meant for welcoming outsiders into the presence and worship of God, supposed to be a beacon of God's glory shining into the rest of the world, into a marketplace for their own gain.

So Jesus literally makes a whip and uses it to run people out, overturns their tables, and scatters their money all over the ground.... **GENTLENESS!!**

But wait a minute - I thought Jesus said he was gentle and lowly? At the very core of who He is I thought He was arms opened wide? Accessible, inviting, full of grace? What's happening here?

- Well we know Jesus was perfect - spotless lamb, perfect sacrifice - so this can't be Him sinning right? This isn't Him acting outside of the will of God.
- Ok but maybe this isn't sin it's just a lapse where Jesus gets righteously angry and he's not being gentle and lowly in this one particular instance, maybe? Well no, because remember at the core of who He is He describes Himself as gentle and lowly. He doesn't waver or shift on that.

So what's happening here?

Well it's clear from this example of John 2 and others throughout the life of Jesus - where He calls religious leaders things like hypocrites, snakes, sons of hell, whitewashed tombs or where he tells Peter "get behind me satan" - **that gentleness is entirely compatible with blunt language and direct action.** Those two aren't incongruent.

Because gentleness does not simply mean passivity. Gentleness is not a personality trait or a demeanor.

Remember how we defined gentleness: Gentleness is the right stewardship of strength for love.

Well that's exactly what's happening in the temple in John 2.

Consider the categories of stewarded strength for Jesus here:

- **Amount** → Jesus vs a whole crowd. He has to show them how big of a deal this is. This is not the time for a debate. They can't debate about it, he has to remove it.
- **Direction** → He's concerned in love for the Jews coming from far away places. Those who have come to worship God being taken advantage of. He's concerned about the hearts of those selling the goods.
- **Motivation** → John 2:17 - He's overwhelmed by zeal for God's house.

His love of God the Father. That's what's driving Him. His desire for the temple to be used for what it was designed to be used for - worship of God. Glory of God. Exaltation of God. Not taking advantage of people. Not this use and abuse → for God's glory. And that drives Jesus to take action.

Scholar Dan Doriani in writing about this passage says this - **"We see, then, that the gentle can be assertive, but they do not assert themselves. We can be strong and assertive, yet gentle if we leverage power not to assert self, but to promote the cause of God or the needy. Jesus was forceful, even confrontational, yet gentle because he used his powers for others. The same holds for us. The question is not how strong we are, but how we use our strength."**

This is not against Jesus' gentleness or outside of His gentleness or a lapse in His gentleness, this is a part of His gentleness. Because gentleness is an act of love - which requires stewarding strength for another's good. Passivity is not loving. Cowardice that doesn't say the hard truthful thing, that disguises itself as gentleness - is not loving.

Jesus is willing to do the hard, confrontational thing that might hurt some folks in the short term, because He's after the greater good of God's glory and their love of God.

Hurt vs. Harm. The best way I've heard this explained is in the difference between hurt vs harm. Both hurt and harm bring discomfort. Both hurt and harm bring some amount of pain. But the intent and the goal and the direction matter and the amount of force matters.

So in **harm** I am intending to cause you pain for a number of different ungodly reasons - I'm angry at you, you hurt me, I'm just a mean person. Whatever the case may be.

But with **hurt** while I may be causing you pain in the moment there's a bigger, more godly intention behind it. So it might hurt me if you come to me to address a sin issue in my life. That might be painful. But you're not harming me. You might be hurting me - but the goal on the other side is my repentance and sanctification, right?

Think about a **scalpel** and a **machete**. Both instruments do the act of cutting something. A machete tries to chop something off - it's violent and aggressive. A scalpel seeks to make a cut to lead to further healing. BOTH CUT, but one cuts with tender care for the sake of healing.

- So some of us are mad at someone else in this room right now, because they lovingly brought something to us and it caused us pain. And (ironically) we were harsh in our response and we accused them of harm and not being gentle, when really it was hurt and they were actually being a better, more loyal, more gentle friend to us in Christ than the 20 other people that didn't want to hurt our feelings so they didn't say anything.
- For others of us, we have been delaying or avoiding a godly confrontation that we need to have and we're saying it's because we're gentle and loving like Jesus, when really we're being unloving, and we're just afraid to do the necessary temporary hurt in order to lead to greater growth down the line.

Gentleness is not the absence of strength. It's stewarded strength.

I love the way pastor Gayle Erwin says it - **"Gentleness is not apathy but is an aggressive expression of how we view people. We see people as so valuable that we deal with them in gentleness, fearing the slightest damage to one for whom Christ died. To be apathetic is to turn people over to mean and destructive elements, to truly love people cause for us to be aggressively gentle."**

Jesus holds the tension of gentleness perfectly. He's lowly, kind, accessible, near and he is full of aggressive zeal for God's glory and our good.

Gospel

Christ is the perfect embodiment of what has always been true about God → That our God is gentle and lowly.

And in the cross, we have the gentleness of our God on full display.

The cross is proof that God is not passive. Our sin is a big deal to God. It separated us from Him. He doesn't sit back and do nothing or say nothing. A holy God must deal with our unholiness. His righteous and just wrath must be poured out. And so Jesus goes to the cross, takes our sin upon Himself, bears the weight of the full wrath and judgment of God that we deserved. So God's gentleness is certainly not passive.

But the cross also shows that God is not harsh. Because He does not treat us as our sins deserve. We deserved the full wrath of God, and yet in Christ → He is gentle with us. Compassionate towards us. Patient. Kind. Gracious. His mercy stays true and it is new every morning. He is gentle, He is not harsh. So all who believe in Christ Jesus, through faith, are declared righteous. Are welcomed in.

Because of the gentleness, the stewarded strength of Christ, we have an offer of life forever with God in His Kingdom. We have access to the one who is gentle and lowly, who is near to the meek, the humble, the downtrodden, the destitute, the cast aside.

He invites us to come to Him. To receive His gentle heart for us. To receive His mercy and compassion, His forgiveness available to us through His life, death, and resurrection. For all who believe, for all who come to Him, for all who lay down our labor, our feeble attempts to prove ourselves and save ourselves, who lay down our burdens at the cross, **He invites to receive forgiveness of sins, life forever, to rest as His children.**

Cultivating Gentleness

And it is this very gentleness of Christ, by the power of the Spirit, which changes us and shapes us and molds us into gentle people. Ready to not be harsh or passive, but to steward our strength for the glory of God and the good of those around us.

Practice Guide

Pray.

Communion → We're going to spend some time remembering that gentleness of Jesus on the cross for us right now.