

GENTLENESS vs. HARSHNESS

SUPPORTING OTHERS DURING THEIR TIME OF WEAKNESS SO THAT THEY CAN ACHIEVE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL IN THE LORD.

“The wisdom that is from above is first pure then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.” James 3:17

DEFINITION OF GENTLENESS

One Hebrew word for gentleness is anah. It is a root word with a wide range of meanings: “to humble and abase oneself in order to pay attention to and respond to others, to condescend, to look down, to keep an eye on, to listen, to sing, to cry out for, to testify, to lift up.” Gentleness is looking past the hardness of a face and seeing a delicate spirit on the inside.

THE PRACTICAL EXPRESSION OF GENTLENESS

Gentleness is demonstrated in our responses to others, especially those who are under our care. We are to discipline ourselves in order to recognize the weaknesses and limitations of others and respond to them with a soft answer and patient encouragement. We are to nurture them with joyful singing, wise answers, crying out to God on their behalf, and lifting them up when they falter.

THE BIBLICAL MODELS OF GENTLENESS

1. A shepherd caring for sheep

The very life and health of the sheep depend on the gentleness of the shepherd. The understanding of a gentle shepherd is expressed in Jacob’s reply to his brother, who wanted the sheep to travel with his four hundred men. “And he said unto him, My lord knoweth that the children are tender, and the flocks and herds with young are with me: and if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die. Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant: and I will lead on softly (gently), according as the cattle that goeth before me and the children be able to endure” (Genesis 33:13-14).

The Lord compares Himself to a gentle shepherd in the following passage: “Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young” (Isaiah 40:10-11). The Hebrew word for gently lead in this passage is nayhal. It means “to carry, to lead, to protect, to sustain.”

In John 10:11, Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep.

2. A mother with her infant

Paul uses the concept of gentleness when describing his love and care for those whom he led to Christ: “We were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children” (I Thess. 2:7). The Greek word for cherisheth is thalpo. It means “to keep warm; to foster with tender care.” It carries with it the picture of a mother hen covering her young with her feathers.

A nursing mother knows that her infants are very vulnerable and easily damaged by harsh treatment or neglect. She knows that they are dependent on her for loving care, nourishment, and protection. In this verse the word Paul used for gentle means “to be kind, mild, and affable.”

HOW IS A GENTLE SPIRIT DEVELOPED?

We learn gentleness at the hands of those who are gentle with us. One of the reasons God allows suffering is to provide us with opportunities to express gentleness to others. This concept is reflected in the definition the Hebrew word gentleness (anah): “to abase oneself, to afflict oneself, to chasten self, to deal harshly with oneself.”

Jesus taught His disciples this concept of gentleness through self-abasement when He said, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). “Come unto me,” Jesus said, “all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Matt. 11:28-29). The word lowly means “cast down, humiliated, of low degree.”

In order to teach us how to be lowly, God carefully takes us through trials. In them, He gives us comfort and counsel so that we will be prepared to share with others who are going through any type of trials. “Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God: (II Cor.1:3-4). Accepting God’s comfort and grace during trials develops an attitude of kindness and gentleness toward others.

HOW GENTLENESS MAKES US GREAT

Twice in Scripture, David testifies, “Thy gentleness hath made me great” (II Sam. 22:36, Ps. 18:35). In these passages the Hebrew word for great is rabah. It means “to increase in abundance, to excel exceedingly, to enlarge in every way, to gather much, to multiply.” Gentleness begins with pain and sorrow and ends in an abundant increase. This is the way of God. If we die to ourselves, we will live; if we give bountifully, we will receive bountifully; if we sow in tears, we will reap in joy.

The life of Jabez is a beautiful picture of the meaning and potential of gentleness. Jabez means “sorrow.” His mother gave him this name because she “bare him with sorrow.” Names in the days of Jabez were very important. Often they were predictors of a person’s future. However, Jabez wanted to change the focus and goal of his life, so he called on the God of Israel, saying, “Oh that Thou wouldst bless me indeed, and enlarge my border, and that Thy hand might be with me, and that Thou wouldst keep me from harm, that it may not pain me! And God granted him that which he requested”(I Chronicles 4:10, NASV).

HOW GENTLENESS IS BASIC TO WISDOM

When James describes the qualities of wisdom, he includes gentleness: “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy” (James 3:17).

The gentleness that comes from true wisdom is the result of an understanding heart. That is exactly what Solomon requested from the Lord: “Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people” (I Kings 3:9). The Hebrew word for understanding in this passage is shama. Shama is used in the following passage for the word hearing: “Hear (shama), O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them” (Deut. 5:1). Thus, gentleness is the result of a hearing heart.

The word shama is also translated obey in Scripture. As we listen to the Word of God and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, we will escape the harshness and corruption of the lusts of the flesh and experience the fruit of the Spirit, which is “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Gal. 5:22-23). The word gentleness in this passage is chrestotes, which refers to moral excellence in character and attitude.

A practical expression of wisdom and gentleness is to speak evil of no one and to speak peace and harmony with everyone. “Put them (all believers) in mind to...speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men” (Titus 3:1-2). “The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient” (II Tim. 2:24).

HOW GENTLE ARE YOU?

- Have you developed self-discipline and abasement in order to be attentive to the hurts and needs of others?
- When you give instructions or responses to others, do you take into consideration their weaknesses and limitations?
- Do you have a shepherd's mind-set toward those who are looking to you for spiritual leadership or example?
- Have you translated past pain and suffering in your life into reminders to protect others and prepare them to have a right response to any offenders?
- Are you irritable and reactionary when people with needs intrude upon your time or energy?
- Do you speak evil of someone you dislike?
- Do you look for ways to teach those who are not as spiritually mature as they should be?
- Do you give a soft answer so that you do not offend or discourage others?
- Do you see potential in others and purpose to help them grow in the Lord?
- Do you look for opportunities to gently share the gospel with those who are hurting and open to hear about His love?