



September 25, 2022

Rev. Dr. Thomas Evans

Ephesians 4:29-32

**Fruit of the Spirit: Antidote for the Modern World:
Kindness & Gentleness**



Poor communication not only causes frustration and alienation but hurts the bottom line in business. In a survey of 400 companies with 100,000 employees each, they attributed an average loss of \$62 million per year to this! (*) Now imagine measuring the modern method of debate's impact on people's mental, social, and spiritual health.

In one British study, social media disrupted sleep, led to depression, memory loss, poor academic performance, nausea, headaches, and TREMORS! (**) Sounds like the health warnings on a pill bottle!

These ills are triggered by posturing, vitriol, and hatred and vanity posing as opinions and moral judgements. Rather than opinions, people lob verbal bombs to communicate. The antidote for these ills is nothing less than the Fruit of the Spirit: of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness generosity and self-control. In God's Spirit we discover an invaluable approach for fruitful dialogue and debate. It not only provides a template for civil discourse, but it enables us to do so through recognizing our common humanity using grace, humility, and respect as touchstones, thereby forging a process that draws people across difference closer from the start.

The specific antidote for anger, rage, bitterness, slander, and every form of malice – the ills of the human Spirit listed in Ephesians – is the fruit of gentleness and kindness.

In scripture gentleness is not simply a generic mildness but a way of approaching others in

the midst of debate and difference. This Spirit of gentleness is not timid, nor complacent, nor weak. It is open, respectful, hopeful, and directed.

When someone shouts and screams it simply discloses their own lack of certainty. Rather than a sign they believe deeply in what they are saying, more often it is a cover of fear and their hope to win through increased verbal force, attempting to intimidate their opponent into submission, rather than gain a convert in their cause. But in the cause of Christ there are no strangers, no enemies, only those, like us, lost without God's love in their hearts.

When we inject kindness and gentleness where there is animosity, anger, and cruelty, we live out the pattern of behavior and speech set by our Lord.

Jesus was masterful at this approach, letting the force of truth sink into another's heart rather than volume of His words. Thus, when a crowd wanted to stone a woman, He simply said, *"Whoever is without sin cast the first stone."* And that is the problem. Too many are casting stones at others while failing to realize their own sins. One by one the people dropped their stones and walked away because Jesus masterfully led them to self-examination.

This Spirit of gentleness seeks the good for all rather than simply the good of the one speaking. Imagine if when Jesus stood before Pilate He went into a long diatribe about Pilate's weak moral character or if He railed against the crowd for failing to stand up for Him while defending His divine status

and spewing terrifying fates to all who defied Him. That simply would not be the Jesus we know.

I remember being restored in a Spirit of gentleness in 11th grade AP Bio. I had finally bested my academic nemesis on a test! I knew this because I peaked at his grade as the teacher was handing back the tests. He did not yell at me. In fact, he didn't say a word. He looked at me, knowing exactly what I had done and why. He walked over to my desk took a pen, deducted 3 points from my test which was just enough for me to lose the top grade.

In Galatians 6:1 Paul writes, *"My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness."*

Though I was fuming, it didn't last. In fact, I felt terrible the moment I peeked, and I couldn't unlook. But his action restored the balance and restored me. The key phrase in Galatians 6:1 is "restore". The aim of admonishment is not to shame or to cancel, but to restore.

This is the failure of the so called "Cancel Culture" movement. It seeks to hold people accountable and to remove their power which is good. For too long those in power have simply been allowed to abuse, demean, and dominate with no accountability.

But it fails in other important ways. It seeks to demolish rather than restore. The problem with the modern world is it seeks to cast words as stones in order to inflict pain, rather than casting the truth in order to heal. Jesus restored those about to stone this woman by removing the necrotic evil that had seized their hearts.

As Titus challenges us, *"slander no one... be peaceable and considerate, and always... be gentle toward everyone."*

Our entire faith is predicated on God's willingness to come down and, despite all logic, rather than demolishing us God sacrifices for us, God redeems us, and God restores us to community. And Paul is demanding that our speech have the same lofty goal.

In Ephesians we see Paul's recipe for productive and healing speech. He begins perhaps with the hardest part, *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths."* Paul is a realist. He knows all types of words will enter our heads. BUT DON'T SAY THEM!

This strategy begins with a purge. Paul explains, *"purging all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."* As Mark Twain wrote, *"Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured."* The anger festering in our heart is debilitating and leads us to hateful words and actions.

Next Paul tells us how to choose which words to speak, *"only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."*

As we choose our words, we do so not to satisfy our need to speak but to serve the one who will hear them. If there is a fire in the building, we need to tell people. But there is still more required of us to live in the Fruit of the Spirit. The heart, the intention matters along with the words we use.

I still remember an episode of the TV show M.A.S.H. when Hawkeye (Alan Alda) is railing against the exceptionally skilled yet pompous surgeon, Charles Emerson Winchester, THE THIRD! He would rather Colonel Potter or BJ operate on him because, *"They'd bust a gut to save a life! You wouldn't even work up a good sweat!"*

In other words, Potter and BJ cared. Winchester only cared about being right, not about

the people he helped. You can talk until you are blue in the face. But if people know you have contempt for them, they will never listen.

Again, from Twain, *“Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.”*

Thus, the next part of Paul’s recipe for productive and healing speech. *“Be kind and compassionate to one another.”*

This scriptural kindness is not simply reciprocating to those who are kind to us. Biblically this word refers to the type of kindness that flows forth at all times and God’s plan of reconciliation only comes to pass because the Lord’s kindness showers upon decidedly unkind people. None more than Paul himself who was hunting down Christians and Christ restored him compellingly through temporary blindness but not through malice or bitterness.

This is a relentless kindness that sometimes infuriates others. As we are told by Paul in Romans *“Love your enemies by doing so you heap burning coals upon their heads.”*

Burning coals don’t sound very gentle or kind but when love meets hatred, at first hatred reacts wildly and randomly. But the burning coals stay and eventually sink in. As William Klassen in his essay "Coals of Fire: Signs of Repentance of Revenge" explains, *“In the Egyptian literature and in Proverbs the 'coals of fire' is a dynamic symbol of change of mind which takes place as a result of a deed of love.”* Paul was quoting Proverbs when he spoke of burning coals.

Perhaps you saw it on YouTube a few weeks ago. At a Little League game with incredibly high stakes, the pitcher winds up, throws an errant fastball that strikes the batter in the head, dropping him like a sack of potatoes. An audible gasp emerges from the crowd. Then silence. The batter stands up,

dusts himself off and makes his way to first base. Not an unusual occurrence.

But then the pressure and fear of the moment hits the pitcher like a ton of bricks. And despite Tom Hanks’ assertion, that *“there is no crying in baseball”*, the pitcher, overwhelmed by emotion and the damage he might have done, begins to cry. Alone on the mound his coach does not comfort him and neither do his teammates. But one person does go over to him. The batter! In other games the batter rushes the plate and begins a brawl. But in this game the batter walks over to him, and not caring what anybody thinks, embraces him tells him it’s okay, and then they move on. And the everyone is crying...at this sign of love.

For that young man lived the final step of gentleness that restores, given to us by Paul, *“forgive one another, just as in Christ God forgave you.”* Amen.

(*) <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/communication/pages/the-cost-of-poor-communications.aspx>

(**) <https://www.mcleanhospital.org/essential/it-or-not-social-medias-affecting-your-mental-health>