Lesson 18 – The Holy Spirit’s Gift – To Bear the Fruit of Gentleness or Meekness

In this session, we will seek to answer the following questions:

What does it mean to be Gentle/Meek?
How can we come to a clear understanding of how strong the meek person truly is?
What three Christ like attributes are directly interwoven with gentleness?
What vices are the opposite of gentleness?

Meekness Is Not Being Weak

The Greek translation:

In the New Testament praotes (for gentleness or meekness) has three main meanings.

a. It means being submissive to the will of God;
b. It means being teachable, being not too proud to learn;
c. Most often of all it means being considerate.... What throws most light on its meaning is that the adjective “praus” is used of an animal that has been tamed and brought under control; and so the word speaks of that self-control which Christ alone can give.

William Barclay.

The characteristic of the Spirit’s fruit that we will be reflecting on in this session is Gentleness or Meekness. It is a characteristic that has to do with moderating our natural inclinations and replacing them with the quality of fortitude.

Meekness may well be the most misunderstood characteristic of the Spirit’s fruit. It is not a spirit of timidity or submissiveness, as people often think.

Rather, meekness is possessed by confident, assured people who keep in check the power entrusted to them while remaining attuned and docile to the Spirit’s leading.

Meekness is one of the two words Jesus used to describe himself in Matthew 11:29.

If we have a misconception of what it means to be meek, this statement can be perplexing. How can the Son of God be meek if meekness is expressed by emotional timidity and submissiveness? How can the meek inherit the earth?

In God’s view, the one who should inherit the earth is not the person who allows his power to be ruled by misplaced emotions. Rather, it is the person who, like a powerful stallion controlled by the slightest touch of the rider’s rein, submits his will to the rein—and reign—of the Spirit.

2. Read Matthew 5:5. What promises are made to the person who is meek? Why do you think this is so?

3. Colossians 3:12-17 encourages us to clothe ourselves with meekness, compassion, kindness, humility, and patience. How does God want us to put on meekness and these other characteristics?
Scripture References:

Matthew 11:29
29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your selves.

John 19:1-11

1 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged. 2 And the soldiers wove a crown out of thorns and placed it on his head, and clothed him in a purple cloak, 3 and they came to him and said, “Hail, King of the Jews!” And they struck him repeatedly. 4 Once more Pilate went out and said to them, “Look, I am bringing him out to you, so that you may know that I find no guilt in him.” 5 So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple cloak. And he said to them, “Behold, the man!” 6 When the chief priests and the guards saw him they cried out, “Crucify him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Take him yourselves and crucify him. I find no guilt in him.” 7 The Jews answered, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God.” 8 Now when Pilate heard this statement, he became even more afraid, 9 and went back into the praetorium and said to Jesus, “Where are you from?” Jesus did not answer him. 10 So Pilate said to him, “Do you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?” 11 Jesus answered [him], “You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above. For this reason the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin.

Matthew 5:5

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land

Colossians 3:12-17

12 Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. 14 And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. 15 And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
Gentleness

by Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.

In the spirit of the Gospel from St. Matthew and in the context of so much that our Savior has been teaching us we should reflect on the virtue of gentleness. As Isaiah foretold of the Savior, He will not break the bruised reed He will not condemn, He will not cry out. Gentleness is written on almost every page of the Gospels describing the Savior. Yet there are certain virtues that are popular in certain times because they conform to the spirit of those times.

By now, thousands of volumes have been written on the spirit of our times. In the Western world at least, the features that characterize our age are aggressiveness, boldness, a strong, often, ruthless effort to conquer. Since the turn of our present century we have had two devastating world wars that accumulatively have cost more lives lost than in all the previous wars of human history. Surely, the virtue of gentleness scarcely typifies our age. And yet, if we are going to be authentic followers of the Master, we must be gentle. So we shall first explore, what is this virtue of gentleness. Then look briefly at our Lord’s teaching about this virtue and His practice of gentleness. Finally, we will discuss how to apply all of this to ourselves and why, if we wish to be truly Christ-like, we must be gentle.

Gentleness is the virtue that restraints the passion of anger. Over the centuries it has been variously described; sometimes poetically, sometimes theologically. Where anger flares up, gentleness calms down. Where anger is a bursting flame, gentleness is a gentle rain. Where anger asserts itself and crushes, gentleness embraces and quiets and soothes. Yet, as we hear these and similar descriptions of gentleness, we are liable to make the mistake much of the modern world makes, of identifying gentleness with weakness.

A gentle person is a meek person. So most people think that a gentle person is a weak person. It is just the opposite. In order to be truly gentle and that does not mean soft or sentimental, one must be strong. Only strong people can be gentle, because gentleness restrains strength by love. Whether its strength of body that could destroy physically or strength of will that could crush volitionally or strength of mind that could devastate intellectually. It’s only such people that can even begin to be gentle. And the reason is because they’ve got something to restrain.

But the motive power behind gentleness is always love. Love of the other for whose sake I restrain myself. There are then two qualities that belong to the meaning of gentleness and they are strength and love. As we turn to the Gospels and ask ourselves where and how the Savior has commended this virtue to our practice? At first sight we may be shocked to learn that there is only one expressed occasion when Christ taught us to learn from Him. He was teaching constantly. But only once did He formally tell us, command us, to learn of Him. Learn of me, He told us, for I am gentle and humble of heart.

The primary lesson that we learn from Christ’s own telling us, bidding us, to imitate him in His gentleness is that if we are to be gentle, as He was, we must be humble like He was. Gentleness or meekness, which is synonymous, is impossible in the absence of humility. Why? If we’ve ever asked ourselves why do we get irritated with people? Why do they bother us? Why all these inner and sometimes outer flares of passion? Its because somehow, though we may not even articulate the fact to ourselves, we don’t like what the person is doing. We feel the person has no right to be doing this. At least in my presence or I wouldn’t do this. Who does she think she is, talking that way to me? If we wish then, in imitation of Jesus, to be gentle, we must become humble. The best single barometer of humility, by its nature is quite hidden, is how gentle we are. Only humble people will be gentle. Because only they will honestly say to themselves, “why should I get angry with her, come to think of it, I’ve just done the same”. Or why should I be irritated? If I’m really honest, I know there must be things that are irritating to him or her. So why is one irritant irritated with another irritant?
If we are humble, if we look into our hearts, not just at times, but constantly, what do we see there? If we do look, we don’t see, except those items we’re looking for. If we look into our hearts we see sin, passion, weakness, ineptitude, crudeness, self-conceit. You name it and we’ve got it. All it takes is a good hard look, but that takes humility. We are so prone, as the same Jesus has been telling us, we are so prone to see the faults, even the littlest thing that Christ calls a speck in our brother’s eye, and we don’t see the beam in our own. And do you know why? The beam is so big in our own eyes, we can’t recognize the fact that our brother does have virtue, does have fine qualities. Remember this: we always see others through our own eyes. And our eyes are sinful eyes. So much more that could be said about Christ’s teaching about gentleness. Christ practiced his gentleness from the womb of His mother. No objections are recorded by Mary or Joseph for having to trek the long miles to Bethlehem.

In His public life the Savior was gentle with so many irritating people. That’s a description of the twelve apostles. These twelve men irritated Christ. There were many reasons they gave Him, from Peter on down. He was forbearing, kind, understanding, repeating, explaining, gentle with sinners. Magdalene at Christ’s feet. The woman taken in adultery. The mother’s whom the disciples told to get these kids out of the way. And most tellingly, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ was even gentle to the traitor who kissed Him. In His passion until He expired on the cross He was gentle, forgiving to those who had crucified Him. His last dying act was an act of gentle mercy to the thief at His side.

How much we have to learn from the Master. There is one final question for us. Why should we be gentle? Or, more fundamentally, why is gentleness so insisted upon in Christian spirituality? The first and most obvious reason is because God became man to teach us this virtue. There are, as we know, two fundamental attributes in God relative to His creatures. They are the attributes of justice and love. Surely God had every reason to be angry with a sinful world. If He had expressed His anger, He would not have become man. If only divine justice was to be manifest, there would have been no Incarnation. God became man precisely to teach us that even though God is just and has many reasons for righteous anger and punishment of a sinful world God did not want to avenge himself on man’s sinfulness. He became man so He might show us His love for us by restraining His divine strength.

In others words, God’s mercy is His gentleness. That’s the fundamental reason why we should be gentle: because God became man to practice this, the most necessary of virtues when justice is to be restrained by love. Secondly and understandably, we are to be gentle because Christ is so insistent on our practicing this virtue. His word for us should be our law. Gentleness is not an option. It is not merely an opportunity. It is a grave obligation. And the more we intend and insist that we are trying to imitate Jesus, the more gentle we must become. Otherwise we are only His followers in name.

But there is another reason why the practice of gentleness towards others depends on God’s gentleness towards us. If we are provoked by others, we provoke God. If we tell ourselves that others make us angry and maybe there’s just provocation. So what, unless we are kind and understanding, forgiving and forbearing, in a word, unless we are gentle with the failings and often the merest foibles in others, how can we expect God to be gentle or merciful towards us?

And, before Him, we have committed more than foibles. The virtue of gentleness is built right in to the middle of the Lord’s Prayer. Forgive us, we plead, with God. But Christ tells us only insofar as I forgive others. Why be gentle, patient, putting up with, bearing with, not complaining, not reacting not avenging myself in a thousand ways that our sin-laden nature has of being angry? Why? Because in the exact degree to which I am un-angry, and gentle with others, God will be un-angry, and gentle and merciful to me.

On this same level we might also soberly remind ourselves not only is our gentleness towards others a condition for God’s gentleness towards us but, hear it, we having sinned and God wanting to give us the opportunity to expiate our sins, how good of God though, we must admit, dear Lord, how hard of God. See what He does. He puts irritating people into our lives, people that annoy us, that disturb us.
There is such a thing as love at first sight. There is also such a thing as un-love at first sight. There are some people, good people, who for some mysterious reason just don’t appeal to us.

All the things that people can do wittingly or unwittingly to us, towards us, or in our presence.; what they say, often what we think they think about us, can make us angry. The Lord has given us this wonderful opportunity for expiation. If we realize the mystery hidden behind this divine virtue of gentleness, I don’t think we would pray for annoying people in our lives, but we would welcome them. Dear Lord, thanks, here’s another one. And I am not being facetious. I am simply sharing with you what is our common faith.

I am not quite finished. There is one more great value to the practice of gentleness and that is in the apostolate which, as we know, always begins right at home. The first object of our apostolic zeal should not be the destitute people in Northeastern India. They should be the people right at home. If we want to be influential in effecting others, if we want to be effective in bringing Christ into the hearts of others, we have to be gentle. If we wish to be convincing and persuasive, in a word, if we want to be effectively apostolic, we have got to be gentle.

The beatitudes, variously translated by different translators, Blessed are the gentle, they will possess the land. You might say to yourself, who wants land anyhow? That’s not the point of the beatitude. Gentleness can achieve, can conquer, not just people but nations. All the great apostles of history, beginning with Jesus, were so effective in winning the hearts of men because they were, as the first apostle told us, gentle and humble of heart. Let us ask Him and His mother to give us what we all need: greater meekness, greater gentleness, being sure that there is no single virtue that will more surely identify us as Christians than if people see us, especially under provocation, calm, peaceful, indeed, mysteriously more at peace because we are more provoked. Nothing under heaven except the grace of God can make us, as we should be, gentle. We need that grace. Jesus will give it to us if only we earnestly ask Him. Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make our hearts like unto thine. Amen.

**Catholic Prayer For Patience and Gentleness**

Bestow on me, O Lord, a genial spirit and unwearied forbearance;
a mild, loving, patient, heart;
kindly looks, pleasant cordial speech, and manners
in the exchange of daily life;
that I may give offence to none,
but as much as in lies live in charity with all men.

Johann Arndt, (1555-1621)

“Nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as real strength.” – St. Francis De Sales.

“Only the weak are cruel. Gentleness can only be expected from the strong.” – Leo Buscaglia

“It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them….. Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.” - Thomas Merton

“The way to overcome the angry man is with gentleness, the evil man with goodness, the miser with generosity, and the liar with truth.” – Indian proverb.

“What would you have? Your gentleness shall force, More than your force move us to gentleness.” – William Shakespeare
Meekness/Gentleness

Presence of God

Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto Thine.

Meditation

1. Temperance makes man master of himself by controlling the passions of concupiscence; meekness makes him master of himself by controlling the impulses of anger. The great value of this virtue lies in the fact that it assures the soul of that inner peace which is so necessary in order to fulfill serenely all its duties toward God and toward our neighbor. The soul, when upset by resentments and anger, is unable to see things in their true light, to form unbiased judgments, to make wise decisions, or to keep words and actions within the limits of courtesy and kindness. A person's manner becomes brusque, unrestrained and often unjust, provoking displeasure in others; charity is cooled and harmonious relationships are disturbed. Unrestrained anger clouds the mind, preventing it from recognizing God's will, and thus making the soul swerve from the line of duty to follow the impulses of the passions. It is the task of meekness to moderate and calm all such movements of passion by giving the soul mastery of itself, enabling it to remain tranquil, even in difficult or irritating circumstances. "Let us be very meek toward everyone," exhorts St Francis de Sales, "and take care that our heart does not escape from our hands; therefore, let us place it every morning in an attitude of humility, meekness and tranquility. Perfect equanimity, meekness and unadulterated graciousness are virtues more rare than perfect chastity and are most desirable." In order to keep our heart free from the movements of anger, we should be prompt in restraining them as soon as they appear, because if we favor them, even a little, they will at once gain strength, and it will be much more difficult for us to overcome them. Constant fidelity in repressing every feeling of anger will gradually bring us to the enjoyment of the sweet fruit of meekness: "The meek shall inherit the land, and shall delight in abundance of peace." (Psalm 36:11)

2. Meekness has a very special importance in the development of a life of prayer and union with God. How can a soul, agitated by the storms of anger, apply itself to recollection and intimate conversation with God? In vain will it try to apply itself to prayer: its mind and heart will escape it, following after the imaginations aroused by passion. "Non in commotione Dominus", The Lord is not in the earthquake (3 Kings 19:11); God does not let Himself be found nor does He show Himself in the midst of disturbance and excitement, but only in interior peace and calm. When we are disturbed, even slightly, by impulses of anger, we are unable to perceive the delicate impulses of grace or to hear the gentle whisper of divine inspirations: the noise of our unbridles passions prevents us from listening to our interior Master, and losing our guide, we no longer act according to God's good pleasure, but allow ourselves to be carried away by the whims of our own impulsiveness, which will always cause us to commit faults.

Our interior soul knows very well that everything that happens to us, however painful, is permitted by God for our sanctification; yet in moments of rising anger, this thought vanishes and we no longer see anything but the creature, which has injured us and against which we wish to react. If we wish our life to remain always under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, our actions to be always directed by grace and conformed to God's will, we should never permit ourselves to yield to the impulses of anger, not even under the pretext of good. Rather, in these moments we should use our energy to suspend every judgment and every act, striving to re-establish in our heart the peace necessary to judge things in the light of God.

Our Lord teaches His ways to the meek, because only one who has silenced all resentments and feelings of anger is ready to be instructed by God, to listen to His voice and to follow it.
Colloquy

"O Jesus, meekest Lamb, who being cursed did not curse, who suffering injuries did not threaten, who receiving the greatest contempt, answered with divine meekness or preserved an admirable silence, help me to follow Your example, to repress my anger, to embrace meekness and armed with patience, to suffer willingly any labor so that I may come to enjoy eternal repose with You." (Ven. L. Du Pont).

"O Lord, with Your help, I desire especially to practice meekness and resignation to Your will, not so much in extraordinary matters as in the events and vexations of everyday life.

"As soon as I notice anger rising within me, I will gather my strength, not impetuously but gently, not violently but sweetly, and I will endeavor to restore peace to my heart. But knowing well that I can do nothing by myself, I will take care to call upon Your aid as the Apostles did when they were harassed by the tempest and buffeted by the angry waters. O Lord, would You allow me to invoke You in vain? Deign to hasten to help me at such times; command my passions to subside, raise Your hand in blessing, and a great calm will follow. Teach me to be meek toward all, with those who offend or oppose me, and even with myself, not becoming angry with myself because of my frequent relapses and defects. When I find that I have fallen, in spite of my efforts, I will meekly rise again and say, 'Come, my poor heart. Behold, we have fallen again into the ditch which we have so often resolved to avoid. Let us rise now; and leave it forever. Let us have recourse to God's mercy; let us place our hopes in it, and it will help us.' Trusting in You, O Lord, I will begin again, and keep to the path of humility and meekness." (St Francis de Sales)

The Gentleness in Life

Posted by Susan Terbay on August 17th, 2011 in Columnists

Have you ever wondered if aliens landed on our planet and turned on the news or picked up a newspaper and read the headlines what their perception of earth’s humans might be? If they had a mission to find gentleness, love and compassion among humankind would they get back into their vehicle and just leave believing it does not exist on earth? The immediate concept could be we are a violent people, who hate each other and allow so many of our vulnerable – especially our children and our elderly to suffer. Diseases seem to have power over all humankind and compassion and understanding is not important as success and monetary gain.

Right now it does seem extremely difficult to find gentleness in our world. Families as well as individuals are struggling; jobs are not to be found, homes are lost to foreclosures, hope seems to be just a word, faith is challenged and love seems to be lost. This is the reality of so many and where are we in all of this in our own lives and what are we doing about it?

One of my dearest, oldest friends, Em, awakened me to see the gentleness in life and reminded me of it in my own life. In a card she had sent to me was one simple sentence:

**Until life becomes gentle again. (Patience Brewster cards)**

Of course I sat with tears streaming down my face because there have been times in my life when I didn’t feel its gentleness, I felt life as a struggle, and forgot about the gentle times – the birth of my children, the loves in
my life and even the outreach of friends during my struggles. How quickly I forgot about God’s gentle touch in
the life given to me and the life and nature surrounding me. Em sent me words that I needed to read.

That evening I sat on my porch and closed my eyes as the setting sun glimmered through the tree in my back
yard. Sitting there I envisioned the sun dancing among the leaves through the gentle cool breeze and I said a
prayer for Em and then the list expanded to all my friends, my family, my children and grandchildren who have
made my life gentle when I felt only its struggles.

Below is something I wrote that evening….

The Touch of Life’s Gentleness

A mother’s kiss
A father’s touch
A tear on the cheek
A smile in gazing eyes
Touching a new born with life’s gentleness

A kiss to ease the scrape
A snuggle to block the hurt
A wiping away of tears
A word to cause a smile
Touching a child with life’s gentleness

A kiss to express passion
A hug to reflect affection
A tear of acceptance
A journey together
Lovers touch with life’s gentleness

A kiss to comfort
A hug to shield against the sorrow
A sharing of tears
A moment in silence – listening
Friends reaching out with life’s gentleness

There are also cool summer breezes; butterfly landings; sparrows singing; silent winter nights; sips of autumn
drinks; purring of a kitten and nuzzling of a puppy. All of which are among many moments in life that also
speak of life’s gentleness.

Yes, we live in a world of violence, hatred, indifference and diseases that destroy the both the human body and
soul but we also have within each of us the gentleness of life. We won’t make front line news by being gentle
but then neither did our Blessed Mother and yet we all know her contribution to our world then and now. We
are all children of God and to ignore the gentle moments in life is to ignore their Creator and to never share
them with one another is to never reflect the love and gentleness of God. It is our choice – what do we choose?

As we find ourselves struggling in life we just need to take a moment to remember the gentle moments of the
past “until life gets gentle again.”
GENTLENESS

In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, Saint Paul points out his behavior as a visiting evangelist: “. . . we were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7). In his First Letter to Timothy, Paul says that a bishop’s behavior should be “not aggressive, but gentle” (1 Timothy 3:3). Together, these verses tell us that gentleness results from sensitivity to fragility; like a good mother’s caring protection, there should be no abrupt or forceful movements, no pushing, no arguing, and no manipulation.

IF YOUR PRAYER is truly effective, then, you should be led into a nurturing attitude to others that always tries to understand their fragility so as to guide their development at their own pace.

**Personal Meditation:** How often do you become frustrated when others don’t do what you want them to do? How often do you try to manipulate others with shame—that is, to attempt to make them feel that something is wrong with their *being*, rather than with their *behavior*? How often do you become argumentative when others don’t do what you think they should do?

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*How the Mystery of Jesus Outraged in the Eucharist makes His Meekness to Shine Forth*

We offend Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament by voluntary distractions, by irreverence, by giving license to our eyes and our tongues; by an irreligious deportment, by profanation and sacrilege; and yet amidst so many horrors He is meek and patient; He sees all, and appears as though He did not; He suffers all and is silent. During twenty centuries He has not allowed us to perceive even one single time that He is displeased; not a movement of impatience, not a sign of ill-temper. He might launch His thunders against the profaners, open hell under their feet; but He loves better to say to us, “Learn of Me because I am meek!” (Matt. 11:29) What a marvel of meekness! And, also, what a lesson for me! What a condemnation of my hardness and of my impatience! I cannot bear to be opposed, that others should have their defects, and that they should not be angels! O Jesus so meek, teach me to suffer everything with meekness, without making any one suffer in any way, to moderate my quickness of temper, my anger, my bitter reproaches.

"This was the method that Jesus used with the apostles. He put up with their ignorance and roughness and even their infidelity. He treated sinners with a kindness and affection that caused some to be shocked, others to be scandalized and still others to hope for God’s mercy. And so He bade us to be gentle and humble of heart." -- St John Bosco

And in the end, He won their souls.