

Gentle The Character of the Christian Tim Challies

Today we continue our series on the character of the Christian. We are exploring how the various character qualifications of elders are actually God's calling on all Christians. While elders are meant to *exemplify* these traits, all Christians are to *exhibit* them. I want us to consider whether we are displaying these traits and to learn together how we can pray to have them in greater measure. Today we will look at what it means for an elder—and every Christian—to be gentle.

Paul writes to Timothy, “Therefore an overseer must [be] not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome” (1 Timothy 3:2–3). Similarly, he tells Titus that an overseer “must not be arrogant or quick-tempered ... or violent” (Titus 1:7). The positive characteristic here is gentleness and it is opposed by the two negative characteristics of violence and quarreling. The elder (and, therefore, every mature Christian) pursues gentleness and flees from violence and bickering.

To be gentle is to be tender, humble, and fair, to know what posture and response is fitting for any occasion. It indicates a graciousness, a desire to extend mercy to others, and a desire to yield to both the will of God and the preferences of other people. Such gentleness will be expressed first in the home and only subsequently in the church. It is a rare trait, but one we know and love when we see and experience it.

Alexander Strauch notes that to pursue gentleness is to imitate Jesus. He writes, “Jesus tells us who He is as a person: He is gentle and humble. Too many religious leaders, however, are not gentle nor are they humble. They are controlling and proud. They use people to satisfy their fat egos. But Jesus is refreshingly different. He truly loves people, selflessly serving and giving His life for them. He expects His followers—especially the elders who lead His people—to be humble and gentle like Himself.” Similarly, John Piper writes, “This [gentleness] is the opposite of pugnacious or belligerent. He should not be harsh or mean-spirited. He should be inclined to tenderness and resort to toughness only when the circumstances commend this form of love. His words should not be acid or divisive but helpful and encouraging.”

The elder, then, must be gentle, able to control his temper and his response to others when he is attacked, maligned, and finds himself in tense or difficult situations. He is marked at all times by patience, tenderness, and a sweet spirit. Negatively, he must not lose control either physically or verbally. He must not respond to others with physical force or threats of violence. When it comes to his words, he must not quarrel or bicker or be one who loves to argue. Even when pushed and exasperated he will not lash out with his words, he will not crush a bruised reed or snuff out a faintly burning wick.

I am sure you realize that God calls all Christians—not just elders—to be gentle. Elders must serve as examples of gentleness, but each one of us must display this trait if we are to imitate our Savior. There are many texts we can turn to, including this one which tells us that gentleness is a necessary fruit of the Spirit: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Shortly thereafter Paul says,

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1).

He urges the Christians in Ephesus to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” and says that this involves living “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3). When speaking of the congregation under Titus’ care he says, “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people” (Titus 3:1–2). The evidence is clear: We are to be gentle so we can serve as a display of the one who deals so gently with us.

Self-Evaluation

So, how about you? Does your life reflect the meekness and humility of gentleness? I encourage you to prayerfully ask yourself questions like these:

- When someone wrongs you, are you prone to lash out in anger? If so, does that anger express itself physically, verbally, or both?
- Are people afraid to confront sin in your life because they fear your anger or your cutting words? Do your wife and children fear you?
- Would your friends and family say that you are gentle? Would they say that you treat them with tenderness?
- Do you like to play the devil’s advocate? Do you like a good argument? What would your social media presence indicate?

Prayer Points

The God of peace is eager to give you the peace of God (Phillipians 4:7, 9). So, I encourage you to pray in these ways:

- I pray that you would make me more like Christ so that I may be gentle just like he is gentle. I pray that I would regularly consider all the ways in which you have been so patient and gentle with me.
- I pray that you would help me swallow my pride, confess my sins to others, and restore any strained relationships I have.
- I pray that you would give me the grace to be patient and calm when others attack and misunderstand me. Help me respond with gentleness even in the most difficult circumstances.
- I pray that I would be slow to begin an argument or to wade into someone else’s.

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