

## “The Fruit of the Spirit: Gentleness”

(Galatians 5.22-23a)

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November 18, 2018

The fruit of the Spirit is . . . gentleness. Or, perhaps, *meekness*. That’s how the King James version translated this particular fruit, and about a dozen other translations have followed suit. A couple translations even suggest “humility.” Which is it, and what difference does it make?

Let’s go straight to the Greek. The word here is *praotes* (or *prautes*). Not a very common word; it shows up only eleven other times in the New Testament. It’s a noun, related to the adjective *praos* (or *praus*), “gentle” or “meek” or perhaps “humble,” which shows up four times. These words are very old; they predate the New Testament by about a thousand years; there’s nothing explicitly Christian about them – except that “gentleness” or “meekness” or perhaps “humility” is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

The word appears infrequently enough that we can look at each verse, and consider what the word really means. Let’s start with some verses that use the word to describe Jesus. “Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Matthew 21:5) That’s from the Palm Sunday story, when Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. That word “humble” is the same word that shows up here in the fruit of the Spirit. The point is that Jesus is not overly brash here. Kings typically rode horses. Jesus is a king – King of Kings, he’s called! – but he chooses a donkey, not a horse. It’s still a representation of his *might* and his *majesty*, it’s still enough to attract a great deal of attention, but he’s not *flaunting* himself. He’s not being unnecessarily showy. So, the translation “humble” makes sense here. “Meek” might also work, but probably not “gentle,” because “gentleness” has to do with *actions* or *behavior*, whereas “meekness” and “humility” have more to do with one’s *attitude* or *demeanor*. This verse is talking about Jesus’s *attitude* or *demeanor*.

Perhaps this is a good time to pause and ask, what’s the difference between “meek” and “humble”? Merriam-Webster says that “meek” refers to *enduring injury with patience and without resentment*, or being *deficient in spirit and courage*, or *not violent or strong*. “Humble” means *not proud or haughty*, or *reflecting, expressing, or offered in a spirit of deference or submission*, or *ranking low in a hierarchy or scale*. Humility tends to suggest an *intentional deference*, while meekness often implies a degree of weakness or deficiency. Humility is more *intentional* than meekness. So let’s go with “humble” for that Palm Sunday passage; that was definitely *intentional* on Jesus’ part.

Jesus himself says this: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble

in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:29) Interesting that he says both “gentle” and “humble;” here, those two words are distinguished from each other; in Greek, the word translated “humble” here really just means “lowly.” “I am gentle and *lowly* in heart,” is literally what he’s saying. A yoke was a wooden beam used to connect two animals to a plow; it makes sure the animals are going in the same direction, and divides the work between them. A farmer would put the yoke on the animals. The idea is that *we* are called to bear *Christ’s* yoke. Do you want to go around with a beam connecting you to a plow? Sounds uncomfortable, doesn’t it? But Christ’s yoke is easy to bear. It’s ... *gentle*. Here, I think “gentle” is definitely a better translation than “meek” or “humble;” neither of those words would make sense in this context. So, our score is 1 and 1 – one for “humble,” and one for “gentle.”

The apostle Paul also uses this word to refer to Jesus: “I appeal to you by the meekness and mildness of Christ.” (2 Corinthians 10:1) In context, Paul is talking about how he’s going to deal with some of his opponents, some of the people who don’t really think his words are just human words and don’t carry any greater significance. He doesn’t want to have to be bold with those people; he just wants them to be cooperative. Really, he wants to be *gentle* with them. Firm, but gentle. I’m inclined to think that *gentleness* would be a better translation than *meekness*. That’s what Paul’s trying to get at, I think, he wants to be both *gentle* and *mild*. So, score 2 for “gentle” and 1 for “humble.”

Similarly: “What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Corinthians 4:21) Again, he’s talking about his interactions with arrogant people. He wants them to back down, so that he can come with “love in a spirit of gentleness” rather than beating them into submission. “Gentleness” makes sense here; score 3 for “gentle” and 1 for “humble.”

This theme of “gentleness” continues in his advice to his young protégé Timothy: “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth.” (2 Timothy 2:24-26) It’s the same idea: you do have to *correct* your opponents, the people who are wrong or misguided about God and God’s ways, but you want to do that with *gentleness* if possible. Don’t beat people up with strong words unless you have to! This is really good advice for anyone; there are times when people need to be corrected, and it’s easy to get a little hot under the collar, and do that more harshly than necessary. I’m taking a mental note here, because I know there are times when I get a little steamed myself! Elsewhere, he says, “if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” (Galatians 6:1) In another place, Paul tells Timothy to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness.” (1 Timothy 6:11) In all of these instances, “gentleness” is clearly the best translation, so our score is now 6 for “gentle” and 1 for “humble.”

Paul also says – in several places – that this is how *all* Christians ought to be. “I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love...” (Ephesians 4:1-2) “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” (Colossians 3:12) Notice the words “humility” and “gentleness” side-by-side. There’s a different word used for “humility.” The word we’re looking at today really doesn’t mean “humility” most of the time. Here’s another one: “Remind

them to be subject 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 every courtesy to everyone.” (Titus 3:1-2) Those are all *behaviors* he’s talking about, not *attitudes*. I think “gentle” is the better translation in all three of these instances. Our score is now 9 for “gentleness,” 1 for “humility,” and 0 for “meekness”!

Other New Testament writers use the word similarly. 1 Peter says: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” (1 Peter 3:15-16) This is the same issue as in the letters to Timothy, namely, how to deal with people who oppose you. If at all possible, be *firm* but *gentle*. James also says: “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.” (James 3:13) Again, he’s talking about our *behavior*, not our *attitude*. That brings our score to 11 for “gentleness”!

But what about this? “Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight.” (1 Peter 3:3-4) Is this behavior, or attitude? I think this is more *attitude*. And it’s *intentional*, too, like Jesus on the donkey. So I’m inclined to go with “humble” here. “Gentleness” 11; “humble” 2; only 2 more passages to go!

“Rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” (James 1:21) I checked a number of translations of this verse; most prefer “meekness” here, but some go with “humility,” and a couple say “gentleness.” I think this is more attitude than behavior, so I’d go with either “meekness” or “humility,” and honestly I prefer “humility” here. If we’re talking about what kind of attitude we should have when we receive God’s word, I think *humble* makes more sense. We have a way of letting our *ego* get in the way of what God is trying to say to us, and we need to set that ego aside, so we can truly *listen*!

So what’s our score? I’d say it’s 11 for “gentleness”, and 3 for “humility”, with no clear cases where “meekness” seems to be the better translation. That brings us to a final, very interesting verse: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” (Matthew 5:5) That’s how we know that line. Imagine if it said “Blessed are the gentle,” or “Blessed are the humble.” What difference would it make, for the way you live *your* life? Do we think this verse applies to *us*, or to some other group of people, just because of how it’s worded? What if he really meant *gentle*? Or what if he really meant *humble*? What if he was telling us *what kind of attitude we should have towards other people, and towards God*?

*That* verse needs to be read in concert with *this* verse: “The fruit of the Spirit is ... gentleness.” (Galatians 5:23) These are the *same words* in the original New Testament. What would happen if they were translated the same way? “Blessed are the *meek*,” and “the fruit of the Spirit is *meekness*.” Or, “Blessed are the *humble*,” and “the fruit of the Spirit is *humility*.” Or, “Blessed are the *gentle*,” and “the fruit of the Spirit is *gentleness*.” Do you see why this matters? I think Jesus may be trying to *bless* the very people who *exhibit* this quality that is a *fruit* of the Holy Spirit. And if this quality is, indeed, a *gift* of the Holy Spirit – as Paul so clearly tells us that it is – then *isn’t Jesus trying to bless us*, when we *manifest* that gift? What do *you* think? Is Jesus trying to bless *you*, when *you* manifest this gift?

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