

quiet rather than ostentatious, exemplars of faithfulness may be right in front of our eyes, yet remain largely invisible to us. This has, I fear, been one of the unfortunate (and undoubtedly unwriting) consequences of the Promise Keepers movement. By calling men away from their homes and family obligations for weekend gatherings where the virtues of promise keeping could be trumpeted, this movement may have blinded some men to the quiet, less self-congratulatory exemplars of faithfulness in their own homes. What some men most need is not another man who can help them keep their promises but to learn that the best exemplar of faithfulness may be their own wives. Can we imagine a million women heading off for the weekend to declare their commitment to promise keeping while their husbands stayed home with the children? If not, does this tell us anything important about faithfulness? Is it possible that many women are too busy *being* faithful in innumerable and gentle ways to see the need to hold a pep rally about it? Perhaps not a few Christian men would benefit from paying attention to such exemplars in their very midst.

*May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. (1 Thess 5:23-24)*

## NINE

### Cultivating Gentleness in the Midst of Aggression

*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all bitterness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. (Jas 1:19-21)*

*If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. 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. (Gal 5:25-6:1)*

**F**ootball stadiums. Saturday morning cartoons. Workplace. Music videos. Toy stores. Movie theaters. Living rooms and kitchens. Computer games. School classrooms. Novels. Friday night dates. Network news programs.

What do all these have in common? At least one thing: they are all primary venues for the staggering amount of violence—both real and fictional—that permeates our lives. Even if one argues that fictional violence merely reflects the violent society in which we live, one has to admit that such portrayals do little to offer other options for resolving conflict. Perhaps this is one reason why the following statistics suggest a problem of epidemic proportions:

□ The Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one million people die each year in this country as a direct result of violence. Researchers



also found that about three out of every four murders of children on the planet take place in the United States, which has more child homicide, suicide and gun-related deaths than any other of the world's twenty-six richest nations.

□ Depictions of violence occur in over half of all television programming, with the average television viewer exposed to roughly 18,000 violent interactions per year.

□ Workplace violence has shown a staggering increase in recent years, even though the apparent causes of this violence are usually relatively minor annoyances or offenses. (The same could be said about the recent outbreak of so-called "road rage" incidents.)

□ Each year, nearly two million men in this country severely batter their wives.<sup>1</sup>

Although scholars and experts disagree about the precise relationship between the prominence of violence in the mass media and our cultural penchant for solving conflict violently, one thing seems clear: we are both the most violent society in the world and the one that immerses itself most deeply in portrayals of violence—a connection which, though difficult to demonstrate, hardly seems coincidental. But for Christians the issue need not be circumscribed so narrowly. For us the question is not merely whether media portrayals of violence encourage acts of violence, or whether it makes many viewers more aggressive or antisocial, or whether it only numbs us to the real effects of violence. For us the question is this: How do you cultivate gentleness in a culture like ours?

### The Character of Gentleness

The eighth fruit of the Spirit listed by Paul is variously translated as gentleness, meekness or humility. This word—together with several others that are used throughout both Testaments—point to that strength of character required to ground one's relationships in something other than pride and power. In each case these words originally have their roots in economic and social realms, where one's lowliness is not merely a matter of inner attitude or disposition, but is open for all to view. Indeed, in the Old Testament the same word group (*'ānī*, *'ānāw*) often refers to the poor, the afflicted, the

humble, the meek and the lowly. Because the Old Testament is clear that Yahweh is the advocate of those who are exploited by the rich and the arrogant, over time, this word group came to be associated with not only the materially poor but also those who in humility rely on Yahweh alone. For example, God proclaims to Israel through the prophet Zephaniah that a day is coming when "I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy mountain. For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD" (Zeph 3:11-12). Elsewhere in the Old Testament the meek and humble are promised that God will be their advocate, particularly when they are oppressed by the proud (Ps 10:17-18; 37:11; 147:6; 149:4; Is 11:1-4; 29:19ff.).

Arrogance, pride, haughtiness. These attributes characterize those who through power and strength of will attempt to secure their own future well-being. By so doing, they deny their need for God. Israel itself is often characterized as stubborn or "stiff-necked" (Ex 32:9; 33:3,5; 34:9; Deut 9:6, 13; 10:16; 2 Chron 30:6-8). The image is telling: not only does it suggest stubbornness but also a refusal to bow to another's authority. This image of ancient Israel as stiff-necked carries over into the New Testament as well. For example, in the disciple Stephen's speech before the council, he provoked his listeners not only by referring to ancient Israel's tradition of being stiff-necked but also by adding a telling connection, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do" (Acts 7:51).

Opposing the Holy Spirit. Quenching the Spirit. These are dangers that must be avoided by anyone who desires to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit. In the above contexts these dangers arise on account of our stubborn pride and our desire to secure our own futures apart from God. Rather than placing our trust in ourselves and our own abilities, God calls us to humble ourselves and place our hope and trust in God and the kingdom that God is ushering in.

This kingdom is an upside-down kingdom, where God's order is restored by reversing or inverting the order routinely instituted by human beings. The kingdoms we construct almost always exalt the rich, the powerful, the proud



and the aggressive. For those who have eyes to see, however, the reign that God is ushering in is of a quite different sort. For example, by humbly submitting to the will of God, Mary is placed in a position to see the in-breaking of God's reign:

My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever. (Luke 1:46-55)

Jesus also speaks of this inversion in the Beatitudes, where he insists that both the poor in spirit and the meek are blessed (Mt 5:3, 5). Significantly, the meek do not aggressively conquer the earth and subdue it; instead, they inherit it: it is given to them. And closely connected with this theme, a persistent refrain echoes throughout the New Testament: All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted (Mt 23:12; Lk 14:11; Jas 4:10; 1 Pet 5:6). Jesus underscores this point powerfully in one of his parables:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple

to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Lk 18:9-14)

Those who would follow this crucified Messiah must recognize that following him involves cultivating different sensibilities than those promoted by the dominant culture. Twice in the New Testament, Christians are urged to clothe themselves with humility and meekness. Both to the elders and to the younger believers Peter writes, "And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Pet 5:5). Paul offers a similar admonition to the Colossians, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience" (Col 3:12).

I have claimed that each fruit of the Spirit is a specific manifestation of love and that it does so by embodying a steadfast other-directedness. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that when Paul speaks of love to the Corinthians, he insists that love is not "envious or boastful or arrogant or rude" (1 Cor 13:4-5). In short, love is not focused on itself.

Love's other-directedness takes many different forms. For example, Timothy is instructed that "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness" (2 Tim 2:24-25). All of us have likely been corrected by people whose focus was clearly on themselves. They were correcting us, to be sure, but they seemed to be doing so primarily because they derived a degree of pleasure from being the ones to set us straight. Such correction is rarely marked by gentleness. In contrast, the person who is other-directed, who cares more about the one being corrected than about his or her own ego, can do so with a measure of gentleness, recognizing that the issue is one of love—of desiring what is best for the other—rather than one of control or power.



Indeed, there appears to be an intimate connection in Scripture between gentleness, meekness, humility, lowliness and even patience: each requires us to give up trying to exercise absolute control over the world. Because we believe that God's Spirit continues to be active in the world, we are freed from the necessity of clawing our way into positions of power in order that God's will might be done. We are freed from having to force our wills upon other people, freed from having to think too highly of ourselves, freed from having to think we are always right, freed from having to assert ourselves in order to get what is our due and freed from having to retaliate in order to secure justice. Even though Paul's words to the Romans have been quoted earlier, perhaps now we are in a better position than before to see how they hang together:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord." (Rom 12:14-19)

In several of the passages above, Christians are admonished that their speech ought to be marked by gentleness. James, more than any other New Testament writer, elaborates on this point, suggesting along the way the close connection between gentleness and wisdom. Although the entire third chapter is pertinent to our discussion, only the last half is quoted here:

With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly,

unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. (Jas 3:9-18)

I have argued throughout these chapters that the fruit that the Spirit desires to cultivate in our lives is rooted in the very character of God. We are called to love because God loves; we are called to be faithful because God is faithful and so on. But what about this fruit? In what sense is God gentle, meek, or humble?

The Hebrew word *ʾani* is never used with reference to God anywhere in the Old Testament. God is not poor, lowly and humble as we are. But it would be a mistake to assume from this that God is to be equated with power or brute force. If meekness is the strength to refrain from resorting to power and coercion, then certainly there is an important sense in which God is meek. This sounds odd to our ears, not least because we commonly associate meekness with weakness. But the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ is not weak, even if that God does not exercise power the way we tend to. God reveals the divine character most determinatively in Jesus Christ, whose life is characterized not by the exercise of brute force, power or coercion, but by self-sacrificing love. For those of us accustomed to thinking of God as "the power guy," this may be the most surprising feature of the God we encounter in Christ.

When John, in the book of Revelation, looks for the conquering Lion who can open the scroll and its seven seals, he sees instead a Lamb. The Lion is the Lamb, and the way of the Lamb is the way of the cross. Yet such surprises are not limited to the closing chapters of the Christian story. When we look for a king born of royalty, we find instead a baby wrapped in strips of cloth lying in a manger, born to a peasant girl of no account. When Jesus' time has come to begin his ministry and we look for him to put John the Baptizer in his place, we find instead a Jesus who humbly approaches John in order to be baptized by him. When we look for Jesus to take the world by storm, to win over those who have power, influence and prestige in order to advance his



kingdom more efficiently, we find instead an itinerant preacher and healer who spends much of his time with the weak and outcast of society: children, lepers, prostitutes and tax-collectors. When we see Jesus rejected by the Samaritans, we look for him to do what his disciples wanted done—to rain down fire upon them—but instead he rebukes *us*. When we look for the conquering hero to make his move, to enter into the royal city on his white charger to signal to the people that the time has come to establish his kingdom, we find instead a Jesus who enters into Jerusalem astride a humble donkey. When we gather with him for the last time in that upper room, expecting to get our marching orders and to honor him by pledging our allegiance to him, we find instead that he honors us by washing our feet and by calling us his friends. When Jesus is arrested and taken before the authorities, we look for him to set those authorities straight, to proclaim proudly and defiantly that he is God's anointed one; instead we find him strangely silent, showing no need to justify himself. When we look for a deliverer who will crush the opposition by superior force, we find instead a servant-messiah who allows himself to be crushed and bruised for us. What kind of God is this?

We are often tempted to think of these details as little more than the frame around the picture we call Jesus' life. The picture itself—not the frame—is what is important, we tell ourselves, and because we assume that God is mostly about power and control, we construct a picture of Jesus out of those parts of the narrative that fit our assumptions: the miracles, his stinging rebukes of the religious authorities, the triumphant resurrection. Yet what if the surprising details mentioned above are not part of the frame but integral to the picture itself? What if these details reveal something about the very character of God?

Such a view, though perhaps strange to us, is not foreign to Scripture. Jesus instructs us to take up his yoke and learn from him because he is "gentle and humble in heart" (Mt 11:29). The New Testament testifies that God exalts Jesus because Jesus humbles himself. Thus this movement from humility to exaltation mentioned earlier is not just sage advice that Jesus proffers to the crowds; Jesus' own life embodies this pattern as well. If we are inclined to

overlook this, the great hymn in Philippians drives the point home with clarity and beauty:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:3-11)

Finally, though Scripture is largely silent on this point, Christians throughout history have often suggested that we see evidence of a kind of humility, a kind of deference, within the Godhead itself. We see this most clearly with reference to the Spirit: the Spirit neither testifies to itself nor draws attention to itself; rather, the Spirit is self-effacing, bearing witness to the Son (Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-15). Though Christian tradition has resoundingly affirmed that the Spirit is fully God, the Spirit does not exist to assert its proper rights to be worshiped and adored, but to serve as the Godhead's most determinative manifestation of other-directed love.



### Obstacles to a Life of Gentleness

Those who desire to have the Spirit's fruit of gentleness cultivated in their lives must understand not only what gentleness entails but also the obstacles that their culture poses to such cultivation. Like each of the fruit discussed thus far, gentleness does not seem to grow "naturally"; indeed, several hardy and "aggressive" indigenous plants threaten to choke out the Spirit's fruit of gentleness. Although cultivating gentleness will not be easy, we can hope that if such fruit would grow to maturity in our culture, it would be noticed for no other reason than its relative rareness.

*Fostering aggression and self-promotion.* The dominant culture worships strength and power. Often, this strength is manifested through brute force and violence. For example, so-called action films—still one of the most popular genres among young men—usually portray their heroes as gun-toting vigilantes whose goal is to exact justice by violent means. The popularity of many video and computer games seems to be directly correlated to the high body counts they produce. Increasingly we observe that sports are as much about intimidation as they are about skill. We see sports figures who regularly get in each other's faces and who refuse to back down lest they be perceived as weak. We see more and more people who are decked out in "No Fear" T-shirts, not because they lack fear but because they want to project an aura of toughness and invincibility that proclaims: "Don't mess with me."

We are taught at an early age and in various ways that "only the tough survive." Nearly every day we hear of another hostile corporate takeover, and we are told that the business world is a "dog eat dog" kind of world where only the most aggressive, competitive and therefore "fittest" survive. (It seems ironic that so many Christians who are opponents of evolution have so few qualms with this form of social Darwinism.) Thus if we want to "get ahead" in the world, we will have to be assertive, ambitious and engage in self-promotion. Because we assume that everybody else is looking out for his or her own interests, we assume that the only way to succeed is to look after ours. Thus we are counseled to extol our own talents and to push ourselves to the front of the pack. Or as the old adage goes, since you cannot expect anyone else to toot your horn, you had better learn to do it yourself.

Because the dominant culture continues to associate strength and power with masculinity, the culture of aggression impacts young men decisively. Most young boys are socialized at an early age into believing that to be a "real man" they must flaunt their strength and act tough and "macho." Moreover, young boys are taught to hide their feelings (unless they are feelings of anger or rage) and to avoid crying in public, because such emotional displays are viewed as sure signs of weakness. For too long gentleness and tenderness toward others have been routinely regarded as "feminine" virtues and thus "unmanly." But men are not the only ones who eschew gentleness. Women who realize that they are competing for jobs and advancement in a male-dominated society have increasingly discovered that the only way to get ahead is to play by the cutthroat rules that characterize day-to-day life in many sectors of the business world.

One does not, however, have to be immersed in the world of popular culture or corporate boardrooms to see aggression and self-promotion at work. Many of us experience the impact of these "virtues" most regularly in such mundane activities as daily conversations with colleagues, acquaintances and even family and church members. How often, for example, do we find ourselves in the midst of an exchange that revolves entirely around put-downs, insults, one-liners and other forms of sarcasm and ridicule? In many forums such activity is regarded as sport or entertainment. Most of us have likely been on the giving and receiving end of such comments enough times to realize that they usually involve a subtle (or not-so-subtle) form of self-promotion. In desiring to draw attention to myself, I degrade or humiliate another person, wrongly assuming that if I have diminished another person, then I have inevitably exalted myself in the eyes of other people.

Although we rarely consider this kind of practice to be violent when we are the perpetrators, the fact that many of our own deepest wounds have been exacted at the tip of a seemingly harmless barb suggests otherwise. Even more telling is how frequently we injure in this way those we claim to love the most. This, of course, is no accident. A relationship of mutual intimacy and vulnerability always reveals the weaknesses in another person's armor. That we would then turn around and exploit that knowledge by aiming an acerbic



and humiliating dart precisely at that point reveals much about how deeply we have drunk at the well of aggression and self-promotion.

Such examples remind us how difficult it is, once having imbibed at this well, to be "selectively" aggressive or self-promotional. Many sincere people, for example, insist that although they would have no qualms about using violence to protect their families from harm, they would never consider using violence against their own family members. Yet when violence is considered as a viable option for dealing with conflict, we should not too readily assume that we will always discriminate judiciously among possible objects of our violence. In other words, it may be more difficult than we imagine living out our insistence that violence is appropriate in some contexts but not in others. That aggression and violence may not be able to be turned on and off like a light switch may help account for the overwhelming statistical evidence that the most dangerous person in the life of a child or wife is "the man of the house."

*Aspiring to positions of power.* In the midst of a dominant culture that promotes aggression and self-promotion, it seems only "natural" that we would also be encouraged to grab and exploit for our own benefit whatever power we are capable of seizing. How often have we been told that we must grasp for power and influence in order to "make a difference"? If you want to get anything done, we are told, if you want to make an impact, you have to be in a position of power to do so; otherwise, you are doomed to ineffectiveness and, ultimately, failure. Hence, people who want to make their mark on the world will have to make their peace with doing so by using the world's ways, which are usually the ways of power and coercion.

This lesson is perhaps taught most determinatively in that arena we call politics (understood here in its more popular and narrow sense). At an early age we are told repeatedly that the president of the United States is the "most powerful man in the world." Presumably this is an awe-inspiring thing and explains why he commands our respect and that of others around the world. If we want other ways to gauge how important we believe the "political" sphere to be, we need only note the staggering amount of time, energy, media coverage and money devoted to it. How many times have we heard in our

lifetimes that if you want to make a real difference in this society, you must be engaged in passing legislation, lobbying congress, electing officials or running for office yourself? This, we are told, is where the action is.

Yet politics is not the only venue that encourages us to aspire to positions of power. After all, most of us do not aspire to be president of the United States (many of us wouldn't want the job if it were given to us). Because power as humans exercise it almost always involves the capacity to coerce people to do things they might not otherwise do, we learn relatively early in life that it's more fun to get others to do what we want them to do than it is to do another's bidding. Although for many of us this lesson may have first been learned when our parents put one of us "in charge" while they were briefly away, the lesson was reinforced over and over again at schools, playgrounds, churches and jobs. All of us have been in situations where those in authority "lorded their positions" over us; that is, they took inordinate pleasure in reminding us that they were in charge, that they exercised power over us. People who repeatedly find themselves in this position can be forgiven if they grow tired of such antics and long for something different. Sometimes they seek to be self-employed so they can "be their own boss." Other times they start their own company or work their way to the top of their present one, so that when they say "jump," it will be their subordinates who are expected to ask "how high?"

What does all of this have to do with gentleness and humility? Nothing, and perhaps that is the point. Although our society unapologetically fosters aggression and self-promotion in many conspicuous ways, some obstacles to a life of gentleness and humility are less obvious. These more subtle ones, I suspect, are the ones that are most invisible even to many Christians, at least if the level of discussion among Christians is any indication. What subtle effect on the cultivation of gentleness and humility, for example, is produced by a mindset that assumes that one can only make a real difference in the world if one is in a position of power, if one is in a position to set the agenda? How does such a mindset encourage us to think about those in our society who are not now (and will likely never be) so positioned? Finally, how does our ambition, our single-minded desire to ascend to the top, encourage us to treat those we pass up along the way? With gentleness and humility? Not likely.



### Cultivating Gentleness

Christians are called to be the people of God in the midst of the world. God's purpose in calling us to a life formed by the Spirit is not to parade our lives before others in order to draw attention to ourselves, win their praise or even convince them to be "better" people. Instead, God calls us to be the body of Christ in order that we might be a light to the nations, showing them something of the character of God. What resources does the church have for cultivating a life of gentleness in the midst of a society marked by aggression and self-promotion?

*Altering our posture through prayer.* One of the Desert Fathers once said, "Prayer is the seed of gentleness and the absence of anger." Why might this be so? At least two reasons come to mind. First, Christians have observed for centuries that though we find it quite easy to speak harshly about people to one another, it is much more difficult to rail against those who have wronged or angered us when we speak of them to God. Indeed, Jesus instructed us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us not because he assumed that such prayer would transform *them* into lovable people, but because he believed that in praying for them a transformation might take place in *our* hearts (Mt 5:44-45). According to Jesus, it is by loving and praying for our enemies that we become children of our Father in heaven. Praying for other people—especially our adversaries—has a tendency to soften our hearts toward them and encourages us to treat them more gently, as other fallible creatures made in the image of God.

This leads directly to the second reason: if we believe that prayer brings us into God's presence, then we should enter into prayer and God's presence with a profound sense of humility. This is why so many Christians across the ages believed that it was appropriate to kneel for prayer. Christians did not believe that such kneeling helped God hear their prayers, but that it helped remind them of who they were before God. Yes, we come boldly on account of Christ, but we also come in humility, with a healthy sense of our own shortcomings and unworthiness. When we do so, the shortcomings of our neighbors appear in a different light than they do when we stand self-righteously before God and give thanks that we are not like other people.

The Christian faith has long underscored the need for Christians to acknowledge regularly their own sinfulness. Although this has already been mentioned in the earlier chapter on goodness, here we see how remembering our own sinfulness can provide a powerful impetus to treat others with gentleness. Once again we have Jesus for our example. When he is confronted by the angry—and self-righteous—crowd who have brought him a woman deserving of capital punishment, Jesus neither joins in the frenzy nor rebukes her accusers harshly. Rather, he bends down quietly, writes in the dust and then speaks, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn 8:7). Jesus goes back to writing in the dust, the crowd slowly disperses, and Jesus finally sends the woman on her way with instructions not to sin again.

Like this woman's accusers, I am often tempted to lash out at another human being when I allow myself to "think higher of myself than I ought." In that moment of anger and self-righteousness I am too easily persuaded that I am somehow "better" than this other person is. In contrast if I were to remember that I am very much like other people—especially when it comes to my sinfulness and need for God's grace—then I might be more likely to respond in gentleness, offering this other person the same grace that I have been freely offered. This intimate connection between the grace we have received and the way we treat other people—not least in the way we speak about and to them—is summed up well in the letter to the Ephesians.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph 4:29–5:2)

*Learning to yield.* What marks the Christian life as a life of the Spirit is not that Christians never have conflict but that Christians negotiate conflicts



differently. The apostle Paul, for example, was frustrated by many of the Corinthian Christians, but rather than be harsh with them, he appeals to them "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (2 Cor 10:1). Christians will have conflicts with other Christians about matters that matter, but when we do, we should not assume that we are always right and that those who think or act differently than we do are wrong. Such presumption is only possible if we have forgotten our own standing before God and one another. We need to yield to other points of view by listening carefully to one another. We need to yield by entertaining the possibility that we may be mistaken. And we need to yield to one another when it becomes clear that we are in error. As the passage from James quoted earlier affirms, the wisdom that is from above is not only gentle but also "willing to yield" (3:17).

Such yielding and admission of error is not a sign of weakness. Indeed, given how rarely public officials willingly admit their mistakes (which always seem to happen in the passive voice: "mistakes were made"), we might conclude that many people find it quite difficult. I suspect Christians are no different in this respect. Yet we do have the resources to be different, because we have been freed from having to insist that we are always right. When we find ourselves disagreeing with other people, we need not be combative in pushing our point of view. Instead, we are free to state humbly what seems to us—from our finite, limited and sinful perspective—to be the case, leaving what comes from that, or even whether others find it persuasive, up to God. Of course, this willingness to yield and to leave the results up to God has implications far beyond the way that we deal with conflicts and arguments. Too often we believe that we control—and are therefore ultimately responsible for—our own destiny. As a result, we are often only too willing to engage in acts of self-promotion, believing that such promotion is the only kind available. But Christians are called to tell and live a different story, a story where God invites us to positions of honor rather than our securing them by running over other people. As noted earlier, central to the narrative of Scripture is the notion that God exalts those who humble themselves. Jesus insists that someday a great reversal will take place, a reversal where the first will be last, and the last will be first (Mt 19:30; 20:16; 23:11; Mk 9:35; 10:31;

Lk 13:30). In God's kingdom those who were thought to be of no account are exalted by God, while those who were secure in their own self-attained positions find that they have been stripped of their self-importance and rank. Such stories should remind Christians not to place too much stock in the world's pecking order. God promises to humble someday those who grab for positions of honor and power and who refuse to humble themselves. It should seem odd for Christians to be caught up in the same struggle for power and control that characterizes so much of contemporary life.

This leads us to consider another way in which the church should model a different politics, a different way of ordering our lives together. With respect to gentleness and humility, this difference involves not "lording" our positions over each other (Mt 20:25; Mk 10:42; Lk 22:25; 1 Pet 5:3). Whatever it means to be in a position of authority in the church, it should mean something very different from the models we encounter elsewhere. Jesus insists that those who are most highly esteemed in God's kingdom are servants (Mt 20:26; 23:11; Mk 10:43), a model which Jesus himself embodied (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45). Although the church is beginning to talk more about "servant leadership," we likely need more concrete examples of it.

*Hangin' out with those of "no account."* Having been reminded that we should not trust the world's (and too often the church's) way of reckoning who and what is important, we are set free to engage those around us in different ways. For example, once we are no longer preoccupied with establishing and maintaining our own status and position of power, we need no longer cut ourselves off from those whose lack of status in the world's eyes threatens to impede our rise to the top. This connection between humility and hospitality to those of "no account" is seen clearly in Luke's gospel, where Jesus' parable about the inadvisability of scrambling for the honorable seats at wedding banquets is followed immediately by these comments:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Lk 14:12-14)



All acts of hospitality, as forms of gift-giving, create and sustain relationships. Jesus reminds us that we are too often tempted to use hospitality as a means to further our own selfish ends. In contrast, God's hospitality, which Christians are called to emulate, is not a hospitality of calculation intended to advance one's own fortunes or status, but a hospitality overflowing with grace. Rooted in humility and gentleness toward "the least of these," such hospitality serves as a channel of God's grace to all involved, reminding them of their equality before God. As Paul reminded the Romans, we should "not be haughty, but associate with the lowly" (Rom 12:16).

Though such acts of hospitality often (and rightly) involve a meal, Christians should also be willing simply to be with those whom society considers of "no account." Similarly, though there will be times when we will be called to serve them, we must also be ready to receive from them. What might those of "no account" have to offer us? We should, of course, be prepared to be surprised, because like many good gifts, they come unexpectedly. Yet given what was said above about the character of God's upside-down kingdom as revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus, we should be prepared to encounter none other than Christ himself. In the Gospels, Jesus identifies himself not only with the "least of these" in the well-known passage in Matthew (25:31-46) but also with other powerless and seemingly inconsequential people:

Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me; for he who is least among you all is the one who is great. (Lk 9:48)

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (Mt 18:3-5)

Children. Jesus suggests that we need to be more like them, especially when it comes to humility. The disciples assumed that Jesus should be attending to more "important" matters. How do we tend to think of children?

Or more importantly perhaps, how often do we choose to be in their presence, believing that in so doing we might be transformed? Much of the public discourse in our society might lead one to believe that children occupy a central place, and perhaps they do. But perhaps many people, not least of all some politicians, simply find it expedient to cast themselves as the champions of children and their futures. Too often, it seems, we have a lot of people who want to speak for and about children, but far fewer who want to speak to them, and even fewer still who want to listen to them.

What might children teach us if we listened? Although it would be a mistake to predict ahead of time (because this would suggest that we need not really listen), perhaps one of the lessons they might teach us is how thoroughly we have adopted the world's ways of looking at life. One of my students, for example, when pondering what it means to be gentle, commented that she could still remember watching the Olympics on television as a young girl when, to her horror, one of the runners fell down, writhing in pain, and none of the other runners stopped to see if she was okay. Why, we might ask, are none of us adults horrified at this?

Many of us fail to consider the possibility that our ambition might have a "dark side" because we have already convinced ourselves that we are only aspiring to these positions of power and influence in order to do good, in order to make a difference in the world. What could possibly be wrong with wanting to make a difference? These are important and complex matters, yet we might begin by reflecting on a crucial story from the life of Jesus. The temptation narratives stand as a consistent reminder that Christians can never be content with simply making a difference, but must also concern themselves with the *kind* of difference they make, which is inevitably inseparable from the way that difference is brought about (Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13). Jesus is not so much tempted to do evil as he is tempted to take the expedient course—to take that route that would undermine his mission by affecting it through means contrary to its character. In the end Jesus turns his back on the audacious, flashy, attention-getting and crowd-pleasing strategy that is offered him in order to carry out his mission in gentleness and humility.

God has given the church resources by which it might cultivate gentleness



and humility. Often, these resources are no further away or more difficult to find than the nearest child or other person of “no account.” Such people remind us of God’s order, an order where the proud, haughty and arrogant are brought low, and the lowly, humble and gentle are exalted. Such people remind us that the Messiah we worship and follow surprised his contemporaries by the “other-directedness” of his life, an other-directedness that included the gentle reaching out to those we left by the side of the road in our race to construct our own kingdoms.

### Reflection Questions and Practical Suggestions

- Reflect on the lives of those people you know whom you regard as gentle or humble. In what specific situations have you seen their gentleness or humility? For example, do they tend to react differently than you do when they are criticized or misunderstood? Consider speaking with them at some point about how they have come to respond with gentleness and humility.
- Begin now to make a habit of praying for people who misunderstand, disappoint, irritate or attack you. Realize up front that such a habit will be difficult to cultivate. Most of us secretly (and even sometimes, not-so-secretly) relish an opportunity to be justifiably angry with them. If we choose to let some of that anger go by speaking to God—rather than other people—about them, we may find that God softens our hearts toward them, which is often the first step in treating them with gentleness and humility.
- Reflect on your habitual posture for prayer. Although God certainly hears our prayers regardless of our physical posture, we should not thereby assume that our bodily posture in prayer is unimportant. Often we hesitate to kneel because we well realize what such kneeling communicates. Where else, for example, in our culture would we ever find ourselves kneeling before someone else in an act of deference and humility? Perhaps our reticence about kneeling suggests that we are capable of being no less stiff-necked than ancient Israel.
- If you do not already do so, consider praying the psalms on a regular basis. If you need a guide, consider using the Book of Common Prayer, which cycles through the psalms each month. Praying the psalms, as the church has done for many centuries, offers us an opportunity to express the full range of human

emotions before and to God. The psalms are a wonderful vehicle for expressing reverence, gratitude and delight. But they can also serve as a vehicle for expressing some of our rawer emotions as well. For example, many psalms ring out with anger toward the psalmist’s enemies and even toward God. Praying these regularly might remind us that there is little point in pretending that we do not feel such anger; the problem comes when we refuse to bring this anger and the one who has angered us before God.

- Devote some time to evaluating the stories that shape your imagination. Do any of these offer examples of gentleness and meekness? How often do we tell each other stories where conflicts are resolved by some means other than violent ones? As mentioned in several chapters, Christians need to have their imaginations enriched. Often our failure to respond gently and with humility is closely connected to the narrow range of options we believe we have in any given situation. Seek out examples from the church’s history of Christians responding to their adversaries with gentleness and humility. Although Christians have often failed to so respond, there are plenty of examples when they did, and these stories might go a long way toward reshaping our imaginations as we seek to respond to others with gentleness. We would also do well to cut down on our intake of gratuitously violent “entertainment,” since such entertainment tends both to trivialize violence and to stunt our imaginations as we seek to respond to people with gentleness and humility.
- As a step toward greater gentleness, seek to resolve conflicts without inciting further violence. Following the model of Jesus, be willing to absorb violence and anger rather than multiply and perpetuate it. In any conflict seek first in a spirit of humility to identify your own faults and the ways in which you have contributed to the problem. For example, if you find yourself in the midst of an argument with a spouse or friend, try to resist the temptation to attack the other person should you be criticized. Even if you think the criticism is unfair (and most all of us do in the heat of the moment), do your best not to respond in anger.
- Reflect on those times when you’ve been “in charge.” In what ways were you tempted to “lord it over” others? Why do you think you were tempted to



act this way? Look carefully around you for examples of servant leadership that you can model. Don't get discouraged if such people are hard to find, but remember that true servant leaders are often difficult to spot because they're not attempting to draw attention to themselves.

□ Devote some time to reflecting on the people you choose to "hang out" with and your reasons for doing so. All of us can probably think of times in our lives when we desired to be associated with certain people because we believed that this association would raise our status in the eyes of other people. Conversely, we can likely remember attempts we made to avoid certain people because we feared that being associated with them would "reflect poorly" on us. These attitudes stem not only from a misguided desire to be viewed as "important" by those whom the world deems so but also from a willingness to view other people as little more than status symbols to be used for our own benefit. Neither is rooted in the other-directedness that should mark the life of the Christian.

□ Consider what it might mean for us to desire that our relationships reflect something about the kingdom of God rather than our own insecurities. Jesus devoted time and energy to those of "no account" as a visible demonstration of the expansiveness of God's love. Who do you tend to ignore or exclude? Pray that God will empower you to reach out to them in humility and gentleness, not condescendingly or as a way of drawing attention to yourself but as a testimony to the in-breaking of God's kingdom at that time and place.

□ Finally, set aside some time to think seriously about the notion of ambition. In cultures like ours where ambition is widely regarded as a highly desirable virtue, Christians need to ask whether those who follow Jesus should regard ambition as a desirable character trait. Can Christians be ambitious in our society without succumbing to the world's skewed notions of success, advancement and status? If so, then what content remains when we use the word? Or in other words, what would be the purpose or goal of such ambition if it was not to climb to the top of the world's pecking order?

Cultivating gentleness and humility in cultures like ours will not be easy. In fact, the task will be made all the more difficult once we realize that many

around us will often understand our gentleness, meekness and humility as weakness. We must not, however, let this discourage us. Although we earnestly hope that having the Spirit bear these fruit in our lives will have a positive impact on those who taste this fruit, there's no guarantee that it will. But as suggested earlier, perhaps we are called to surrender, in a spirit of gentleness and humility, the notion that we are responsible for what God does with this harvest of the Spirit's fruit.

*I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, 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, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:1-6)*