

## “Spirit of Gentleness”

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Sunday, July 7, 2013

Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 30  
New Testament Lesson – Galatians 6:1-6

Actor Ethan Hawke, reflecting on fatherhood in a People magazine interview, says, “You always see these politicians talk about ‘our children,’ and it sounds like such rhetoric, and then as soon as you have a kid, you realize and go, ‘Oh, this is a really big deal,’ because you realize how much you’re reliant on the rest of your community, how much it starts to matter how violent or frivolous the world is.”<sup>1</sup>

When the Apostle Paul writes to his community in Galatia, he too is expanding the concept of family (our children), so that everyone in his faith community might learn how to guide and support one another as if they were family.

In fact, our New Testament lesson today is just that, a lesson in how to be family. Paul is teaching about being family – whether biological, faith-based or whatever, and he bases his teaching on the “law of Christ.” The law of Christ, as opposed to the written law that condemns, the law of Christ is the law of sacrificial love, where people “bear one another’s burdens,” as Paul says, in mutual support and accountability.

Everyone in the community has a responsibility for building up others in appropriate ways, serving and loving others in the example of Christ, if we can ever fully figure out what that means.

Well, luckily for us, when it comes to being Christ-like, we have a picture-perfect example in Scripture, Scripture such as “I was sick, and you visited me” (Matt. 25:36); “You shall open wide your hand to your brother (and sister), to the needy, and to the poor” (Deut. 15:11); “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (in Luke/6:31); “Pray for each other that you may be healed” (as James instructs us/5:16); “Consider others better than yourselves” (says Philippians./2:3); Speak “the truth in love” (Eph./4:15); and in Galatians, as we heard just a moment ago, “Carry one another’s burdens” (Gal./6:2).

And then there’s the rest of what Galatians says in today’s Scripture lesson. Galatians lists four behaviors for us to model, so that we might become more like Christ, and thus be able to truly live into the vision that God has for us and for our world.

The first behavior we can practice modeling with one another is gentleness. “My friends,” says Paul, “if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit, should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.”

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<sup>1</sup> Actor Ethan Hawke, in People, January 1, 2000, 24.

Gentleness was particularly important for the Galatian church, because the Christians of that day suffered from too much self-pride and self-importance. And gentleness is important for Christians today, since we like all people also tend to let pride and self-importance get in our way. When dealing with others, and particularly others who have wronged us, we by nature get a little self-righteous.

We tend to think we're right and they're wrong so let them come to us, let him come to me, let her come to you first – oh, and she better be ready to crawl on her knees and maybe even give up a kidney to make it up to me – that's how right I am and how wrong she's been.

Of course, it doesn't have to be that way. Rather than falling into such prideful behaviors, like "I walk on water" you can "sink or swim on your own," Paul instructs us to approach others with "gentleness."

Being gentle with one another, even when someone has wronged us, is an important part of being a follower of Christ. When you're a Christian, gentleness just comes with the territory, even though it is so very hard for us when we've been wronged – it's hard to bend over backwards and be gentle with others.

And yet, this is such an important part of being a Christian, that Paul draws a firm contrast between our gentleness and the Christian goal of restoring a transgressor to wholeness – bring someone back into the community, you're your family circle, into a one-on-one relationship, bringing someone back into your group at school or in the workplace.

Paul's lessons can be applied in all areas of our lives, and with equal benefit for all concerned. Now, I say that Paul contrasts gentleness with restoring the person to wholeness because the Greek word that we translate as "restore" actually evokes the image of a dislocation, such as a dislocated shoulder that needs to be reset.

While in sports, dislocated shoulders are often reset with a violent, sudden and quick snap into position, such a quick solution is seldom possible in our communal life as Christians. Once a transgression has occurred – a lie, a hurtful word, a birthday or anniversary forgotten – once such a transgression has occurred, the pain on both sides is so great that extreme gentleness is required, if anything good is going to come of it.

Another interesting thing to note about modeling Christian behavior is that, as the injured party, we actually have more power over the situation than the one who screwed up. And this leads to the second Christ-like behavior Paul points to – caution. Paul tells us, "Take care that you yourselves are not tempted" when someone has wronged you.

In our society, in our families, in our churches and schools and workplaces, it's common for an injured party to quickly criticize, be overly judgmental, and even vindictive: But Paul is saying that this is not what God envisions; it's just not what leads us to God's spiritual blessing and abundance.

Paul is saying we have to be careful (cautious) not to fall into doing things like everyone else, but rather do things as a Christian. Paul is saying that we ought to be the ones to bend over backwards to make the situation right – even though society tell us the exact opposite.

When we choose the path of harsh condemnation and spiritual superiority, this can often be a cover for our own vulnerability, our own sinful nature. Let me say that again ‘this can often be a cover for our own vulnerability, our own sinful nature’. So Paul warns that we must evaluate our motives even as we try to bring someone back to faithful living “take care that you, yourself are not tempted” he says. Be cautious.

The third and related behavior for us to model is self-examination. The key to restoring someone from sin to wholeness is to begin by examining our own motives. Rather than starting out with finger-pointing, Paul advises us to look first at our own nature, our own limitations as human beings, because when held to the standard of Christ-like living, we all fall short; we all sin.

As one theologian noted, we Presbyterians believe in original sin, to which he jokingly added, “cause if you’re going to sin, you might as well to be original about it.”

No, actually, there is no sin that’s all that original. In God’s eyes, we are all equally guilty of falling short, and all equally worthy of being forgiven, of being restored to full and faithful living.

This concept of original sin is what Paul is pointing to when he says, “If those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work,” says Paul, “then that work, rather than their neighbor’s work, will become a cause for pride.”

In other words, don’t take pride in being better than someone who has fallen short, but rather reach out to that person and raise him or her up in Christian love; take pride in that. Let that be your motive.

The fourth and final behavior we should model as Christians is mutual responsibility. Responsibility is actually what makes possible all this otherwise unattainable gentleness toward those who have wronged us; that, and our cautious self-examination of ours motives.

Responsibility: “All must carry their own loads,” says Paul. This means that while the transgressor – the person who lied, cheated, stole, yelled, back-stabbed, or whatever – while the transgressor must be responsible for his or her actions, we as Christians must be responsible for ours.

We must be responsible for helping share Christ-like love with others in such a way as to build up the community of faith.

Ask yourself, how many people never find their way to life-giving faith because all they have experienced is condemnation? How much does our focus on growing the numbers distract us from ministering to the person?

The truth of it is that helping people to help themselves is a long, slow process. The truth of it is that true transformation and healing, for those who are lost and broken, does not happen overnight, and certainly not under a cloud of judgment and self-righteousness.

If we're overly focused on making things perfect for us we run the risk that others will get overlooked, we risk clinging too tightly to the certainty of our facts and figures while losing our grip on the miracle of God's compassion and faithfulness and how that can bless us in unexpectedly abundant ways.

The bottom line is this, it's something Paul says later in Galatians; Paul says if we have to boast, the bottom line is we should boast only in "the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," for in the cross, it is Christ who gave himself in response to – and responsibility for – all sin and all transgression (Gal. 6:14).

So, let us – as families and churches and workgroups and teams – let us all stand together on that. Let us stand firm on Christ's self-giving love and redemption, so that all of us together can enjoy God's grace and mercy, as well as all the other blessings that come from living life in a Christ-like spirit of gentleness. Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Lord, in the words of St. Francis of Assisi, make us an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is sadness, joy; where there is darkness, light.

O Divine Master, grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; not so much to be understood, as to understand; not so much to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.

And it is in prayer, O Lord, that we are drawn closest to you. So it is at this time that we lift our voices and our eyes to you, to sing together the prayer that you taught to us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.