

## **“A Gentle Agenda”**

I Thessalonians 2:6-12

*Series: BELIEVE – Chapter 29. Gentleness*

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One time a couple in our church invited me over for lunch. It was a feast. One delicious dish after another. Each one expertly and lovingly prepared. Now call me a little suspicious, but when I am so royally treated I start to wonder if I am the main course, if I am about to get my just desserts. Or, it may be they simply want to ask a favor. Do they have an agenda? That’s what this turned out to be. But it was a gentle agenda. The husband had a question. Yet he was so quiet, so respectful, so gentle, it took him a long time and a lot of words to make his request. In fact, when he finally asked his question it was unclear to me what he wanted. So his wife said straight out, “What my husband Steve is trying to ask is: ‘Can he apply for the Associate Pastor position at Woodside?’” The wife, of course, was Gloria. It was the first time I met her.

None but God knew back then that Gloria would become our Associate Pastor.

I knew Steve Yi for several years. He served as our Seminary Intern while he was a student at Princeton. When I think of Steve he brings to mind a particular fruit of the Spirit: Gentleness. Steve was soft-spoken, quiet, often behind-the-scenes. Over the years since that first lunch I also came to know Gloria. I found she is never soft-spoken, quiet, or behind the scenes. They complimented each other perfectly. Yet I must say despite these differences, Gloria also bears the spiritual fruit of Gentleness. I see the distinction symbolized in their Korean names. Steve’s name is KyeSu which is a large oak, a sturdy tree. Steve was a strong oak with roots which ran deep. Steve’s gentleness was the shade he offered to all who are mourning, grieving, struggling, hurting, and searching. Gloria’s Korean name is Yongjoo which means “Pillar.” A Pillar gives support, it protects, it holds up the roof. By her gentle strength, Gloria supported and sheltered children, youth, couples, families and seniors especially in those moments when they felt the roof would come crashing down on them.

Together, Steve and Gloria prove that Gentleness is not weakness. True gentleness arises from God’s strength. That’s our theme in BELIEVE this week: Gentleness. The key idea is “I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in my dealings with others.” Our world needs real gentleness because rudeness seems to be through the roof. Everyone wants to play “hardball.” Talk shows feature commentators competing to be “in your face,” aggressive, even offensive. That approach spills over into social media, road rage, classrooms, homes, and offices. In 2013 the Harvard Business Review reported,

Rudeness at work is rampant, and it's on the rise. Over the past 14 years we've polled thousands of workers about how they're treated on the job, and 98 percent have reported experiencing uncivil behavior. In 2011 half said they were treated rudely [at work] at least once a week. [That's a 100 percent increase from 1998.]

A poll of 800 managers and employees reveals the costs of incivility. Rudely-treated workers report:

80 percent lost work worrying about the incident

78 percent said their commitment to the organization declined  
12 percent said they left their job because of the uncivil treatment<sup>1</sup>

Gentleness is rarely found in sports. Some years back, someone asked him how he will handle his 12-year-old daughter's future boyfriends, Charles Barkley replied, "I figure if I kill the first one, word will get out."<sup>2</sup>

Gentleness is just the opposite. According to the Bible, **Gentleness Requires Strength But Not Force**. When someone wants to get their way, they might use force. And force has many faces. Some are physical – punishment and abuse. But other ways are more subtle: manipulation, hiding the truth, lies, flattery, cover-ups, guilt, shame, criticism. Why do we use force? We feel we are weak. We are insecure. We are losing control over people or situations. We are threatened by changes in our lives. Above all, we fear people will not be pleased with us; will not love us ... so we try to *make* them so. That's force.

When the Apostle Paul and his colleagues came to a town called Thessalonica in Greece to share the Good News about Jesus they ran into a true hardball situation. Every time they spoke about Jesus forceful walls of opposition rose up. Yet they did not respond with force.

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else (I Thessalonians 2:1-6).

Paul refused to convince his listeners by telling lies or playing tricks. He did not try to soften them up with flattery or get them to open their wallets and give him money. He employed no threats or intimidation. He did not need force because he was strong – strong in the Lord. God was the one who sent him to tell the good news. God was the only one he needed to please. Paul did not need to control them because God was in control of him. That's the ultimate position of strength.

Pastor Bill Hybels and his brother Dan remember their father as a man who was filled with both God's strength and gentleness.

[When] we sailed with Dad on Lake Michigan we remembered violent storms with 50-mile-an-hour winds. The other sailors would dash for the harbor, but Dad, smiling from ear to ear, would say, "Let's head out farther!" We talked about tough decisions we saw him make. We winced, remembering his firm hand of discipline that blocked our rebellious streaks. Yet for 25 years he spent nearly every Sunday afternoon standing in front of 100 mentally challenged women at the state mental hospital. Few of them could even sing, but he patiently led them

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<sup>1</sup>Christian Porath and Christine Pearson, "The Price of Incivility," Harvard Business Review (January-February 2013)

<sup>2</sup>Newsweek (6-18-01), p. 17.

in a song service, knowing it made them feel loved. Afterward our 6' 3", 220-pound dad stood by the door while each of those disheveled, broken women planted kisses on his cheek.<sup>3</sup>

Bill Hybels continues to live by his father's example. He went on to establish Willow Creek Community Church in the suburbs of Chicago – one of the largest and most influential churches in the world. Gentleness requires God's strength but not force. If you find yourself using force, stop and ask yourself, "Why?" Instead of pushing your way, why not pause and ask God to give you the strength to be gentle.

Second, **Gentleness Requires Sharing But Not Shame**. Paul continues,

As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you (I Thessalonians 2:6-9).

This is perhaps the tenderest description in all of Paul's letters. When most people think of evangelism they picture a preacher stirring up the crowd and shoveling out the fire and brimstone, they imagine door-to-door salespeople interrupting your day and handing you tracts. Yet when Paul speaks about his visit to the Thessalonians, he describes himself as a mother caring for, literally *nursing*, her children. He nurtured them and loved them. He held them close. He didn't just share with them the Good News about Jesus, Paul also gave them his life.

Let me pause for a moment and say that the greatest gift you can give someone is not a car, a college education, a house, a job, jewelry or a vacation. Nothing wrong with any of those but they pale by comparison with the gift of a relationship with Jesus Christ. This is the only gift which gives you abundant life now and eternal life later. It's the only gift which outlasts every other gift on earth. Best of all, it's the only gift which is truly free ... because someone else already paid the price. Parents, your highest calling is to help your children receive that relationship. Students, your education may get you a job but sharing the Good News will give you friends for eternity. Workers, there's nothing you will accomplish on the job which can compare with leading a coworker to Christ.

But remember: share the Good News with love not shame. Paul never placed any burden of shame or guilt on them for all he did. They didn't owe him anything. It's our job to patiently love and nurture people into God's Kingdom instead of pushing them. In order to give them the Gospel you have to first give them yourself. There are people in your life who are hungering for that kind of love. Wayne Cordeiro tells this story:

In 1967 Doug Nicols was doing missions work in India when he contracted tuberculosis and was committed to a sanitarium for several months. In the TB sanitarium, Doug found himself in a lonely, confusing, and troubled place. He did not know the language of the other patients, but he wanted to share the Good News of Jesus with others.

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Hybels, "Dad's Mark," Men of Integrity (July/August 2004).

All Doug had in the sanitarium were a few gospel tracts in their language, Parsee. He tried to pass them out, but nobody wanted them. Then one night, Doug woke up at 2:00 AM, coughing so violently that he could not catch his breath. During this coughing fit, Doug noticed a little old emaciated man across the aisle trying to get out of bed. He was so weak he could not stand up. He began to whimper. He tried again, but to no avail.

In the morning Doug realized that the man had been trying to get up to use the bathroom. The stench in the ward was terrible. The other patients were angry at the old man for not being able to contain himself. The nurse cleaned up the mess and then slapped the man.

The next night, again Doug saw the old man trying to get out of bed, but this time Doug got out of bed, picked up the old man, and carried him to the toilet (just a hole in the floor) and then brought him back to his bed. The old man kissed Doug on the cheek and promptly went to sleep.

Early the next morning, Doug awoke to a steaming cup of tea beside his bed. Another patient had kindly made it for him. The patient motioned that he wanted one of those gospel tracts. The next two days, one after another patient asked, "Could I have one of those tracts too?"<sup>4</sup>

That's one way to nurse people into God's kingdom. What can you do to gently love people into His kingdom?

Finally, **Gentleness Requires Showing the Way for Someone.** Paul concludes this section with:

You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory (I Thessalonians 2:10-12).

Charles Barkley, whom I mentioned before, used to say, "Don't use me or other sports figures as your role models." That's especially true when it comes to your daughter's dates. Barkley would then add, "Look to your parents, your teachers, your pastors to lead you." Throughout BELIEVE we've been learning how to think, act and be like Jesus. It's important that we don't just talk this talk but actually walk our talk. God also wants us to gently invite others to walk with us. Verse 12 in Greek describes a father inviting his children to walk with him so he can encourage them when they feel defeated, comfort them when they are in pain and urge them on when they feel like giving up. Some of the best times I've had with my children were when we went for a walk in the woods.

With whom do you need to take a walk? If you lead a ministry, invite a Timothy to walk with you and learn from you. We need people to join our welcome team and invite guests to walk with Jesus. We need adults and teens to join our children's ministry team and invite kids to walk with Jesus. We need adults to join our youth ministry team and invite teens to walk with Jesus. Every follower of Jesus should have at least one person they are encouraging, comforting and urging to walk Jesus' walk. There is

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Cordeiro, *Jesus: Pure and Simple* (Bethany House, 2012), pp. 59-60

certainly someone near you who could use your gentle guidance. Invite them to go for a walk with you before the week is out.

What I ask you to do is be like Gloria. As I mentioned earlier, Gloria's Korean name means she is a pillar. A pillar holds up the roof and gives support. Over her many years at Woodside she supported the little ones as they learned their Bible stories. She lifted up the Junior Highs and let them know they are loved and accepted. She helped the Senior Highs stand up for Jesus against temptation and despair. She took up into her arms the babies as they took their first breaths and held the hands of those who took their last. And when a family felt like the roof was caving in on them, Gloria stood with them. She was both strong and gentle for them in the name of Jesus. She is a pillar of God's glory to support all of us.

Gloria, you are not a pillar of stone because that would make you hard and cold. You are not a pillar of wood because then you would crack and rot. You are not a pillar of jello because then you would be used in a youth group game. You are a pillar of glory: for if I know anything – it is the glory of the Lord which shines in you. The same glory which lit a bush on fire, filled the Temple and rained down on Pentecost burns within you. Yongjoo, Pillar of Glory, this is what Jesus said to you on the day of your Ordination:

If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches (Revelation 3:12-13).

It was true then. It is true today.  
May it ever be so. Amen.