

Introduction

Matthew 21:1-11 recounts for us the details of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. [Read]

Today is the anniversary of the event about which we have just read. We call it Palm Sunday. Jesus came into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey colt, fulfilling the word of God through the prophet Zechariah. This text highlights the Lordship of Jesus. Jesus sent two disciples to obtain his transportation. He instructed them that if anyone said anything, one simple explanation would suffice. All they needed to know was that THE LORD needs them. The text also highlights the kingship of Jesus. The words of the prophet to Jerusalem were these, "Your KING is coming to you." The text presents to us Jesus as Messiah. The public recognized that he was Messiah. They professed their submission by spreading their cloaks on the donkey and in the road. The crowd expressed their honor and acknowledgment of Jesus' victory by waving palm branches. They voiced their conviction by shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David." So we see Jesus as royal and sovereign. The scene helps us understand that the multitude had no clue that Jesus had to die to enter in to his victory. Many of these very same people had to be among the crowd which at the end of the week was calling for Jesus' crucifixion. Nevertheless, the display on Palm Sunday foreshadows his Revelation 19 return, not on a donkey but on a white horse.

It is highly significant that Jesus came into Jerusalem on a donkey. And it is also important that his return will be on a horse. A king coming into a city on a donkey signals peace. A king coming on a horse signals conquest. When Jesus returns, he will be coming in judgment and conquest. He will tread the winepress of God the Almighty. But when Jesus came into Jerusalem two thousand years ago, he came in peace. He came to make peace. He came as king, but he came in humility and gentleness.

Today we will continue our study on the fruit of the Spirit out of Galatians 5:22-23. We are going to be looking at gentleness. This study corresponds to the demeanor displayed by Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey on what we have come to call Palm Sunday. We will see that gentleness is more than just a mood for Jesus. It is his very heart. And as well it is part of the divine nature which the Holy Spirit produces as fruit in the lives of those who belong to Christ.

[Read text and Pray]

We begin with our focus on Jesus.

I. The Gentleness of Jesus.

We observe gentleness in the life and heart of Jesus as king, as savior, and as priest. So I am going to point these out to us.

A. (As King). Beginning with the triumphal entry, we see the gentleness of Jesus as sovereign. Here he comes riding into Jerusalem. He is being recognized as Messiah. The crowds are calling out, "Hosanna," which is a cry for salvation. It literally means "Save us." These words come from Psalm 118:28-29 and there the translation is "Save us we pray, O Lord!" This was their cry as the Son of David made his grand entrance to the city. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" is an expression of praise to Jesus but also an acknowledgment that he came with the authority of the Lord.

And yet he comes on a donkey. He comes not as a mighty conqueror but in a humble spirit of peace. He is not wresting power out of the hands of another at this time. He is gently being presented to his people as their king. The prophecy of Zechariah declared that the manner of his coming was gentle. The word in the ESV is humble, but the Greek word from which it comes may also be translated gentle, meek, or mild. At any rate humility is the soil out of which gentleness grows. Kings by nature are not gentle. But remember Jesus is not a king with a sinful nature. He is the king with the divine nature. His sovereignty manifested itself in stunning glory as he came not to be served but to serve. He came not to point a finger in our face just to show us who the boss is. No. He came as the king who cares for his people. And his manner was kind.

The metaphor the Bible uses to describe the function and desired demeanor of a king is that of a shepherd. One of our favorite psalms—Psalm 23—sets forth the security and confidence that is known by one whose Shepherd is the Lord. Sheep are vulnerable and tender. They need a gentle shepherd. God possesses such gentleness. He is the God of sovereign power but is tender toward his people. Isaiah captures it for us this way in chapter 40: “Behold the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and GENTLY lead those that are with young.” Gentleness is not the absence of strength; it is not weakness. The Lord God comes with might, but he is gentle. Gentleness is power properly and sympathetically applied according to the needs of the situation. That is king Jesus. He does not refer to himself as the Great Shepherd for no reason. He is sovereign, but he is gentle.

So how does that gentleness appear in action? How does it look? One way it looks is described through Isaiah and quoted by Matthew in chapter 12.

“He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench.” Gentleness is not loud and boisterous. It is tender to the bruised. It doesn’t trounce those on their last leg. That is Jesus. He is drawn to help what is fragile. If you will come to him, he will not cast you out ... period.

B. (As Savior). We also see the gentleness of Jesus as the Savior. This is the picture we get in Matthew 11:28-30. He extends a heartfelt invitation for the weary and heavy-laden to come to him. This is striking. Jesus cries out to the masses to come. He does not go out with a whip and round up people to be forced into submission. He calls to people with an appeal, an invitation. And the invitation that Jesus extends is an invitation to comfort and tranquility. He promises a gentle outcome of REST to those who will come to him. They will find relief, for his is a deep and soul-comforting rest.

Jesus is speaking of the rest that issues in the heart when a man or woman entrusts their soul to him by faith. Weary and heavy-laden are those who are depending on themselves for right standing with God. As we have seen in Galatians, those who depend on the works of the law are enslaved to a cruel taskmaster. They are imprisoned and oppressed. They bear an impossible burden. This is every human being by nature. We are children of wrath. We are clothed with garments of filth beyond our capacity to clean. We are debtors who owe more than we could ever hope to pay. By the works of the law, no one shall be justified before God. We are weary and heavy-laden. Jesus came not to add to that burden, but to remove it from our backs. He says in essence, “I came to relieve you if you will come to me.”

Jesus shows us his heart. It is the heart of God. This is the only place in the New Testament in which Christ tells us about his heart. And here is what he says: "I am gentle and lowly in heart." This isn't some misinformed individual saying this about Jesus. It is Christ himself. He wants us to know him as he is, and he is gentle in heart. Dane Ortlund writes, "In the one place in the Bible where the Son of God pulls back the veil and lets us peer way down into the core of who he is, we are not told that he is 'austere and demanding in heart.' We are not told that he is 'exalted and dignified in heart.' We are not even told that he is 'joyful and generous in heart.' Letting Jesus set the terms, his surprising claim is that he is 'gentle and lowly in heart.'" (Gentle and Lowly, p. 18)

The heart is not a passing emotion but the core of who we are. It is what drives and defines us. Ortlund points out that when the Bible speaks of the heart it refers to the "central animating center of all we do. ... it is who we are." (18-19) And when Jesus declares who he is, this is what he says, "I am gentle and lowly in heart." Christ's lowliness of heart, his humility, is what propelled him to earth to seek and save the burdened, the lost, the miserable, and the condemned. His humility feeds his gentleness to deal with us in understanding.

Who likes to touch a slug? I have accidentally touched a slug or two, and it gives me the creeps. It usually happens when I have left my grill cover off the grill overnight. I reach down and pick it up and start to spread it back over the grill and ... Yuck! It makes we want to run get the salt and dissolve them away. Not a very gentle demeanor is it? But get this. There is a very real sense in which we human beings are by nature more repulsive to Jesus than a slug. Yet Jesus became one of us. And his heart is gentle and lowly toward us slugs. He came and he touched slugs, ate with slugs, healed slugs. He came to save spiritual slugs. And he didn't yank back from doing it. It is to spiritual slugs that Jesus says, "Come to me and I will give rest for your souls." He is gentle and lowly in heart.

C. (As Priest). Jesus is a gentle king. He is a gentle savior. And finally, he is a gentle priest. I want to direct your attention to Hebrews 5. As we look at the first two verses there, we find a key aspect of being a good priest. The text says, "For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he himself is beset with weakness." Not only, then, do we see that a priest is meant to be gentle, but we also see a key link to his being a gentle priest. The link to gentleness is sympathy. "He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, because he himself is weak." If I can't sympathize with you, I won't be gentle with you. But if I am gentle in heart and I can imagine what it is like to walk in your shoes, I will treat you with gentleness appropriate to who you are and what you are going through.

With that in mind, hear this. Hebrews 4:15 assures us that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." The weakness and temptations Jesus experienced as he walked among us slugs enabled him to sympathize with us. He doesn't just imagine what it is like; he KNOWS. He has been right here in the middle of it all. He is absolutely ABLE to be gentle toward us because he knows what it is like. Jesus is gentle in heart; so he is a gentle king, a gentle savior, and a gentle priest. And he says, "Come." Let us respond with the writer of Hebrews to, "therefore then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Gentle Jesus is just what needy people need, and that is us.

D. (Not As Judge) Now, I must say that while Jesus is gentle and lowly in heart and those who come to him will find rest for their souls, there are those who will surely not find rest. And they will

surely NOT experience Jesus in his gentleness. These are the ones who refuse to come to Jesus. If a person will not come to Jesus on the terms of his gentleness, he will surely find Jesus to be anything but gentle on the day of judgment. A day of judgment is coming, and on that day judgment will be brutal. Jesus rode into town on a donkey on Palm Sunday, but a day is coming on which he will return. And the image given to us in the scripture is of one whose eyes are like a flame of fire. He comes not in gentleness but in retribution. He sits on a white horse. He judges and makes war. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to smite the nations he will rule them with a rod of iron and tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

It doesn't mean he is no longer gentle in heart. It means that if you reject his gentleness, his fury is what you will get in the day of justice. Brothers and sisters in Christ, what an awesome Savior, King, and Priest is Jesus our Lord! You should be encouraged. You should be comforted. Are you bruised? Are you smoldering? Are you weak? Jesus knows. He knows our frame. He sympathizes with our weakness. He is mindful that we are but dust. He is gentle and lowly in heart. In him indulge in the rest there is for your soul. Are you facing insurmountable peaks or deep, deep valleys in your life? He knows. He cares. He is gentle. Are you even rebellious? He is like a shepherd who seeks wandering sheep. Don't be afraid. Don't hesitate to turn back home.

To those in this room this morning who are not brothers and sisters, you have not responded to Jesus' invitation to come. Oh why would you not? There is no savior other than Jesus, and there certainly could not even be imagined a savior so wonderful as Jesus. He is sovereign over the universe and possessing all power and authority, but he cares for the worst, the weakest, and the poorest. Come to him, won't you?

Having considered the gentleness of Jesus, let's turn to see the privilege his followers have of being like him.

II. The Gentleness of Jesus' Followers

Paul tells us in Galatians that the fruit the Spirit produces in the lives of those who belong to Christ is characterized by gentleness. It is the next-to-last aspect of the fruit we find in the list. It is nearly last but certainly not least. We must not overlook the importance of gentleness in the lives of Christ's followers. If we are his it is a part of what he will be producing in us.

A. (The Need) We really do need to pay attention to this grace of gentleness. Jerry Bridges in his book *The Practice of Godliness*, observes that "we pray for patience, we pray for love, we pray for purity and self-control. But who of us ever prays for the grace of gentleness?" George Bethune wrote a book on the fruit of the Spirit in the mid-1800s. He asserted that "Perhaps no grace is less prayed for, or less cultivated than gentleness. Indeed it is considered rather as belonging to natural disposition or external manners, than as a Christian virtue; and seldom do we reflect that not to be gentle is sin."

Paul writes the Colossians (3:12) to "put on . . . compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness (or gentleness), and patience." To Timothy Paul issues the exhortation to "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness." Gentleness is way up there with faith, love, and steadfastness!

I think gentleness is underappreciated for the power it wields within human relationships to contribute to a respectful and nurturing atmosphere. We especially seem to dispense with gentleness with those we know best or see the most. And we wonder why there is such strife. May

God create within each of us the desire to reflect Christ and his glory in our longing and pursuit of this godly grace.

B. (The Display) We learn from Jesus's example that gentleness is driven by humility regarding self and tenderness in regard to others. It corresponds to Paul's exhortation to the Philippians to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others." Gentleness looks not only to the interests of others but does so in a tender and caring way. Their condition, their situation, their identity, their personality are taken into account in relating to their interests. It is warm-hearted, respectful, and sweet-tempered.

Being gentle is opposite to being harsh and blunt. It is tender and thoughtful. It is considerate and sympathetic. It is calculated and controlled. It is power not weakness. It makes appeals rather than demands. It is evident in the way we handle china as opposed to tupperware or paper and plastic.

C. (The Profile) Jerry Bridges provides a profile of gentleness which should assist us in assessing and pursuing this grace in our lives. The profile of gentleness has three main aspects. First, a gentle spirit actively seeks to make others feel restful in our presence. Like Jesus, we want others to find a welcome rest with us. They will not be made ill-at-ease but will know we want what's best for them, not merely because we say so but because our demeanor toward them proves that it is so. People should not fear to share their opinions with us or be themselves or to share their struggles.

Second, gentleness exhibits respect and behaves respectfully. It addresses errors, mistakes, weaknesses, and wrong opinions with persuasion and kindness and instruction and encouragement. It does not just spout off disagreement or dismay. Gentleness explains and reasons while maintaining an open ear that listens and open eyes that observe. What a contrast with domination, intimidation, and manipulation stemming from arrogance! Like Jesus, we must be sympathetic. We must be conscious of our own weaknesses, failures, and ignorance. We must bear in mind the golden rule and treat others the way we would like to be treated. That mindset enables and encourages gentleness.

Third, gentleness is not rude. It does not belittle or degrade others for their sins or shortcomings. Gentleness knows that this could be me having fallen, having shamefully disappointed the Lord. Gentleness know that on many occasions IT HAS BEEN ME who was where they are today. Gentleness does not stick one's nose in the air. It gets down with another to lift them up. It does not get out the salt. It gets out the oil to soothe. If there must be sternness, let there also be hope and the ointment of lovingkindness. Gentleness dispenses grace.

Overall, gentleness exhibits a mildness that is gauged by the condition of the people it approaches. It repudiates arrogance and embraces humility and meekness. The more vulnerable the other is, the more careful it is to measure out gentleness in appropriate measure. But like with Jesus, gentle behavior starts with gentleness of heart. There is a disposition in us that is touched by Christ's gentleness with us. There is a heart that feels for others. There is a selflessness that is willing to consider them more significant than ourselves.

D. (The Exhortation) So let me urge you GENTLY but surely to assess your own hearts and lives in regard to gentleness. To not be gentle is to sin. God has sent his Spirit into our hearts that we might display this aspect of his own nature. We grow in gentleness as we walk by the Spirit. It will

proceed from our lives by His power but not by our passivity. Let us pursue gentleness. Let us pray for it. Let us repent of the lack of it. Let us draw near to the one—to Jesus—who is consummately gentle. Let us seek forgiveness and help from him for all our arrogance, harsh words and attitudes, selfishness, and callousness.

As Jonathan Cruse writes, "He will conform you [to himself]. He will take a bruised reed and make it a mighty cedar. He will fan into fire the faint flame that is the Spirit's work in your heart. And you will become holy as he is holy, loving as he is loving, and gentle as he is gentle" (The Character of Christ, 130).

Let us give the glory to God when we see the fruit of gentleness being produced in our hearts and behavior by his great and awesome power.

Conclusion

So when you think of Palm Sunday, you are no doubt mindful of coats spread and multitudes waving palm branches singing "Hosanna!" But I hope in the future you will also think of the image of Jesus on a donkey as a display of gentleness and that it will fan into flame the spark in your heart that wants to be just like him.