

Gentle

Richard Dawson

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Matt 12¹⁵⁻²¹ / 1Thess 2¹⁻⁸

We're into the third in our series on influencing others for Christ. We've looked so far at the importance of generosity where I made the point that generosity is an incredibly powerful way of expressing love and grace and is God's basic stance towards us. As such all generosity speaks of God and therefore constitutes a universal spiritual language. As we become generous people we imitate God's primary attitude towards all people and so become living icons of God's love.

Then we looked last week at service and we saw in a little nameless servant girl an amazing example of service which led to the conversion of a pagan military general and which changed nations and, no doubt, his family. Service allows others to directly experience the love of God and is an amazingly effective evangelical tool. This morning we will finish with something I believe could be the most important of the three and yet which I suspect I've never heard a sermon on before.

I have a wonderful uncle who is, at present, very ill with Alzheimer's disease. I believe he wouldn't recognise me now for he barely recognises his own wife. But he was a man who passed on to me some wonderful principles in regard to relating

to children for he was a remarkable primary school teacher. My uncle could be quite uncompromising in his discipline and I soon learned not to cross him or deliberately disobey him but on the other hand he was one of the gentlest men I knew. He disavowed violence especially with children and he had a remarkable way of entering into the world of children so that they knew he understood them and, more than that, that he wasn't critical at all of their world. He was gentle especially with children who struggled to understand things and he was gentle with children who needed help 'catching up with others.' Most of all he worked hard to make life fun for children and he himself was full of fun. All this created a deep impression in me and I'm sure for 1000's of other children of a man whom one should respect but of whom one never needed to be scared. You see, he was, at heart, a **gentle man**.

Do we realise how important it is to be gentle people. I don't mean whimpish. I don't mean spineless. I don't even mean quiet though that does help. No I mean people who are **careful with and for others**. People who put others at their ease and who go lightly with each other. I mean people who are patient with the difficult, kind to the complainers and understanding of those who are confused. This is what we see in Jesus. As it was said of Him ²⁰**'He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick.'**

Gentleness was a key characteristic of Christ and, indeed, in this passage which we heard from Matt 12 today and which is a quote from Isaiah 42, it is **the central theme**. In His own words just a chapter earlier in Matthew this is also how Jesus describes Himself.

²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; (why?) for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt 11)

And we find this quality something that the NT writers also highlight.

Paul uses it of himself in the 1 letter to the Thessalonians when he says...

⁷though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. (1 Thess 2)

Again in his letter to Timothy Paul outline the quality of a Bishop or elder which are...

²Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, ³not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. (1 Tim 3)

And James when describing what wisdom produces say this...

¹⁷But 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. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Gentleness is everywhere a sign of Christian maturity and a fruit of Christian wisdom. So where do we see it at work?

There are perhaps two key areas where gentleness is crucial and where it makes the most difference. The first is what might be called introductions – these are places in our lives and in the lives of others where someone is a stranger and where there needs to be an extension of grace and favour to help them feel welcome. There are many such places in our lives. Every time we enter into a context which is unfamiliar to us an introduction is needed. Every time we enter into a culture which is less ours than it is someone else's an introduction is needed. Every time we enter into a context which is unfamiliar to us – an introduction is needed and that introduction, to be successful **always has to be gentle**. Children are particularly vulnerable in this area because the world is largely an adult place. The boundaries of every culture create a need for introductions to those from outside that culture. In the main I suspect our culture has a few traditions around welcome but not nearly as well developed as say the Maori who have created elaborate rituals for welcoming strangers. And such welcomes require at

their heart **gentleness** which I will define as ‘a soft touch in all the behaviours which make up human interaction.’

Jesus was particularly good in this area. He deliberately went to people who needed a welcome because His culture – the Jews, had rejected them. He went to them and He did not criticise them but welcomed them into the Kingdom of God and taught what that Kingdom was like. There was no criticism of their flaws or their need. There was no condemnation. There was no threat. Jesus was the true **gentleman** with all whom He met. And yes there was a run in or two with the odd demon and a few Pharisees but a stain or two on the pot doesn't mean we should chuck it out.

Take for example the story of the disciples and the children. Faced with curious children the disciples' reaction was to send them away. Jesus had a completely different reaction ‘Suffer not the little children to come to me for of such is the kingdom of God.’ Welcome, grace, gentleness.

And the key to this is the knowledge of an admission of our own vulnerability. When once we become convinced of our own need of gentleness we too will begin to be much more gentle to our neighbour.

Sociologist Brene Brown's TED talk "The Power of Vulnerability" has garnered over 10 million hits (as of August 2013). For good reason: [She says] we are hungry for the freedom to admit our

vulnerability. Brown pushes us to embrace our own brokenness, with the reality that we are not alone in it, that we are—or easily could be—just one step away from the broken people all around us. Brown says:

“We are **“those people.”** The truth is ... we are the “others.” Most of us are one paycheck, one divorce, one drug- addicted child, one mental health diagnosis, one serious illness, one sexual assault, one drinking binge, one night of unprotected sex, or one affair away from being “those people”—the ones we don't trust, the ones we pity, the ones we don't let our children play with, the ones bad things happen to, the ones we don't want living next door.”

When we recognise this we are so much more awake to the need to be gentle with those around us. Who knows what they've been through today, this week, this year, in the last 10 years. Perhaps they've carried the burden of abuse, violence, a marriage loss, a financial loss? Perhaps they've had to face their own weakness, a failure on their part, a loss which was their fault and which has effected all the people in their family.

Whatever is the case where we have faced up to our own vulnerability we are much more able to be gentle with those around us.

The second major area of our life which requires significant gentleness are those times of crisis when all the normal rules

have been either broken or are of little use because the context has so changed that 'normal' doesn't apply.

As a 17-year-old Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham, was involved in a car accident. Speeding carelessly down a windy mountain road, Anne smashed into her neighbour, Mrs. Pickering. Anne was too afraid to tell her father about the accident, so for the rest of the day she kept avoiding him. When she finally came home, she tried to tiptoe around her dad, but there he was, standing in the kitchen. Anne tells what happened next:

I paused for what seemed a very long moment frozen in time. Then I ran to him and threw my arms around his neck I told him about my accident—how I'd driven too fast and smashed into the neighbour's car. I told him it wasn't her fault; it was all mine. As I wept on his shoulder and then he turned to me and said 4 things I will never forget:

- "Anne, I knew all along about your wreck. Mrs. Pickering came straight up the mountain and told me—and I was just waiting for you to come and tell me yourself."
- "I love you."
- "We can fix the car."
- "You are going to be a better driver because of this."

Anne says, "Sooner or later, all of us are involved in some kind of wreck—it may be your own fault or someone else's. When the damage is your fault, there's a good chance you'll be confronted by the flashing blue lights of the morality police. But my father gave me a deeper understanding of what it means to

experience the loving, forgiving embrace of my heavenly Father."

All of us have been involved in a wreck. We're all in the place before God of having to confess the damage we've done both to others and to ourselves and to God our Father. And, what is more, we should all know that God's response to us is and has always been one of gentleness; of understanding, of grace and of warmth and of acceptance.

We've been loved in a crisis of our own making. God calls us now to love others in their crisis – to be gentle with others even when they've been the architects of their own demise; even when they've been stupid; even when they've been liable; even when they've caused us damage.

When we are gentle with others God speaks through our actions and our pain. God speaks into the life of the one we are being gentle with. God says – 'I love you despite yourself. I love you even in the midst of your mistake. I love you because you are mine.'

That's what the world needs to hear friends and it needs to hear it from you and I. Are you willing to be gentle this week; this month; this year; in this life. God is calling it forth from all of us.