

## ***Gentleness • Galatians 5:22–23***

Lee Atwater was never considered a gentle man; ambitious, bright, ruthless, but not gentle. He had two ambitions he wanted to achieve before his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. One was to manage a winning presidential campaign and the other was to be the head of the Republican Party.

In 1988, at age 37, his first dream came true when he successfully managed the campaign of George Bush in his bid for the White House. That same year, on Election Day, he was asked to become head of the Republican National Committee.

Lee Atwater was young, successful, and powerful. But March 5, 1990, as he was speaking at a Republican fund raising dinner, he was stricken with a seizure that frightened him and those around him. An ambulance took him to a hospital where he was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor that took his life within a year.

But the greatest change that came to Lee Atwater came when he was introduced to Jesus Christ by Harry Dent (South Carolina politician and political mentor to Atwater) and Charles Colson, both former special counsels to President Richard Nixon. Becoming a Christian absolutely transformed Lee Atwater.

The June 1991 issue of *READER'S DIGEST* reports Atwater's own words of the change that took place:

I've come a long way since the day I told George Bush that his 'kinder, gentler' theme was a nice thought, but it wouldn't win us any votes. I used to say that the President might be kinder and gentler, but I wasn't going to be. How wrong I was. Jesus Christ made Lee Atwater a gentle

man!

That's what Jesus Christ wants to do to every one of us as Christians. He wants our lives to be like baskets full of fresh fruit - - - the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Contrary to what some people may think, gentleness is actually a very strong flavor in this mix of flavors that together make up the fruit of the Christian life.

Do you know the way some flavors sort of permeate a recipe? It isn't that they are necessarily better or worse than any other flavors, but they are very dominant. You don't need

much of them to know that they are there. Coffee is one of those strong flavors. You can always tell if coffee is there.

***Gentleness is strength that is submissive. The best example of that is Jesus Christ***

Gentleness is like that. It always assumes strength. Watch a lioness with a newborn cub and you will see how gentle she is with the baby. But, you wouldn't speak of the cub as being gentle with the mother. That's because the mother is strong and the baby is weak.

You may remember "Gentle Ben" who was a gentle bear. And we sometimes refer to a very large and powerful man who is tender to others as a "Gentle Giant".

Those who are weak, small, puny or otherwise lack strength are never described as "gentle". That is because gentleness always assumes strength.

Strength may come in different varieties. If you are a boss, you have strength with your employees. If you are rich, you have strength that comes from money. If you're smart, your

intelligence gives you strength in getting a job and getting ahead. An articulate person knows how to speak the right words at the right time and is sometimes able to handle the people who are smart, and who are rich and who are powerful - having the right words can be a very powerful tool

Being physically large with big muscles, that enormous strength can mean that you can dominate someone else. Parents have strength over their children. The young have strength over the old. Men are usually stronger than women due to their greater physical size.

The issue of gentleness has to do with what we do with our strength. There are many strong people who use their strength to control others, to put people down or harm them. The rich have been known to grow richer by taking cruel advantage of the poor. Parents have abused their children. Employers have manipulated and harassed their workers. Men have used their strength to rape women.

Persons who use their strength for themselves and against others can never be described as gentle. And those who are not gentle do not taste like God who has great strength but uses it in gentleness.

Gentleness, however, is much more than strength. Gentleness is strength that is submissive. The best example of that is Jesus Christ. He was as strong as they come, yet the Bible describes "the meekness and gentleness of Christ" in I Corinthians 10:1.

Let me point you to something in the Bible, in Philippians Chapter 2. It is one of the most powerful statements in the whole Bible, and yet there are many people who don't know anything about it.

Philippians 2:1-4 describes the gentle lifestyle of the Christian:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort

from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each one of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Verse 5 tells how to be gentle. It says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." Okay, so what kind of an attitude is that?

Verses 6 through 8 present the attitude of Jesus:

Who, being in very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!

"Gentle Jesus" was as strong as could be, and yet as gentle as could be. He was the eternal Son of God, strong enough to do absolutely anything. He could speak a word or wave a hand and create a universe or obliterate a planet. He chose to submit all of his strength to God the Father and become obedient, even to death.

A gentle Christian, then, is someone who submits his or her strength to God. She is obedient to God with significant wealth. He lets God control his body instead of using his muscles to get his own way. The Christian boss uses power and authority the way God asks.

As a result, the gentle Christian is not proud or arrogant or selfish or greedy. The gentle Christian is quite humble. He never gloats over power or seeks to inflict it on other people,

but rather submits it to the authority of God.

Albert Schweitzer was a man of many strengths. He was a theologian, a philosopher and an author whose books have been translated into numerous languages. But he was also a medical doctor, an architect, a builder, and an outstanding musician. He was an authority on organ building, an accomplished organist and a world authority on Bach.

He raised money for a hospital in Gabon in West Africa. He designed the hospital and served there as a surgeon. In 1952, when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, he took all the money he won with that prize and gave it to the hospital.

Queen Elizabeth conferred on him the Order of Merit, the highest civilian honor that can be given in the United Kingdom.

One day Albert Schweitzer was asked, "Who is the greatest person in the world?" He answered, "No one can properly determine the greatest person in the world. The greatest

person is some unknown person who at this very moment is gone to help another person in the name and with the loving Spirit of Jesus Christ."

Albert Schweitzer was right. The greatest person in the world is some person most of us have probably never heard of who has great strength but who has submitted that strength to Jesus Christ and is using it for the benefit of others. The fruit of the Spirit is flavored with that kind of gentleness!

This fruit of the Spirit called gentleness can also be described by a rather strange word: soft.

We often think that "strong" and "soft" are mutually exclusive, but that's not the case. We say that love is strong, but at the same time it is soft. Or, if you were to feel the muscles of your arm compared to the hardness of wood or metal, you'd have to admit that the tissue of the muscle is soft, even though it can be very, very strong. So there is no inconsistency with something being both strong and soft at the same time.

Physiologists say that the strongest muscle in the body is the jaw muscle. Yet hunters often describe their hunting dogs as having "soft mouths". A hound with a soft mouth could probably tear a duck in half with a few bites, but that strength is used in such a way that not a single feather is damaged.

Or, think of the human hand. It has the strength to pull the trigger of a murder weapon, to make a fist to smash a face and the power to steal from the local store.

Yet the same hands can be as soft as a mother's touch, as reassuring as a teacher's helping hand, as loving as the care of a nurse in a neonatal unit.

Hands are strong, yet they may be soft and gentle. It all depends on how we use them.

Proverbs 15:1 is one of the most famous sayings in the Bible. It is so famous that many people don't even realize that it comes from the Bible. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." In older translations of the Bible, this verse was translated, "A soft answer turns away wrath."

It's true! Soft words are gentle words. Gentle words are soft words. This doesn't re-

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fer to the volume but the style. You know harsh words when you speak them or hear them. Harsh words are cutting and unkind. They are not centered on the needs of the other person or trying to be sensitive to that person. They are used to exert strength and power over another person. Harsh words put people down. They are mean and unloving.

Soft words are no less true. But they are as concerned about the other person's feelings as they are about winning the argument. Soft words are kind, considerate and courteous. Soft words build up rather than tear down.

If we were able to tape all the words that we speak and then play them back and listen to them, how would we rate those tapes? Are our words soft or harsh? Let's resolve to speak "soft words" and be gentle in our speech – like Jesus!

Meteorologists and sailors are familiar with the Beaufort Wind Scale. It was devised in 1805 by British Rear Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort. The Beaufort Wind Scale has seventeen categories, each defining the effect of wind on sailing.

Category one is "calm" - there is no wind at all. Category 8 is "fresh gale", winds of 19 to 24 miles per hour. In a "fresh gale", twigs and leaves are broken off trees and walking against the wind is very difficult.

At the top of the scale are "hurricanes" with winds above 74 mph. These winds cause violent destruction.

People could also be categorized on a similar scale. Some people are so calm that nothing happens. They never move themselves or anyone else. Others are like gales that are hard to walk against. Some are hurricanes who do violent destruction to other people's lives.

Category 3 on the Beaufort Wind Scale is called "Gentle Breeze" with winds of 8 to 12 miles per hour. Christians are those who are

strong but soft. They are the winds of God, refreshing yet moving others. People who are the gentle breezes are filled with the fruit of the Spirit.

May you and I be Gentle Breezes, for "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, GENTLENESS and self-control."

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