

Ephesians 4:1-6
Gentle Strength
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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The Oregon Ducks Football program is known for more than their arsenal of artistically inspired uniforms and their training facility, aptly named “the Death Star.” A Wall Street Journal article written earlier this year sent ripples through the Sports Talk world with a headline that read: “Why the Oregon Ducks don’t believe in yelling.” As you think about the culture of sports in general, but football in particular, here is a top flight program that no longer uses the traditional motivational tactics like screaming and belittling of players.

One might think that it’s only through a gauntlet of adversity that toughness is instilled. But Oregon is not the only place where an arm around the shoulder and an encouraging word has replaced a verbal tirade following a mistake that has had success with this motivational philosophy.

The winningest football coach in college football history, not Joe Paterno and not Bobby Bowden, is a man who spent 60 years as the coach of the small division III St. Johns Johnnies of Collegeville, Minnesota. With a record of 489-138 and four division III national championships, Gagliardi is famous for a coaching style that was predicated upon “Winning with no’s.” At practice, there was no tackling, no playbooks, no mandatory weight training regiments, no whistles, no grand offensive or defensive philosophy, and also, no yelling.

Stories like these beg the question: is there something unique, something transformative about being gentle with one another? It seems that there is a huge misunderstanding about what gentleness really is. We tend to think of gentleness as a form of weakness. But in reality gentleness is in fact a form of disciplined strength.

Gentleness and strength are not opposed to one another; in fact, the two can go hand in hand, because gentleness is in itself a form of restraint. I still remember it like it was yesterday, holding my children in my arms for the first time, their new lives so small, so vulnerable. And I remember the feeling not only of my heart bursting with love, but I remember the feeling of disproportionate strength between what I had and what they had. What I realized in that moment was that being a parent was going to require not only toughness, but tenderness as well. This tenderness was not weakness, but harnessed, restrained strength.

Gentleness, contrary to what our culture presents, is a gift. It’s an example of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. And so as we look more closely today at gentleness as a gift and the example of the Holy Spirit residing in us, I invite you to turn with me to Ephesians chapter 4, the first six verses. And as you are able, please stand with me as we hear God’s Word to us.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

In the New Testament, gentleness is described as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. And one of the first mischaracterizations that we've already touched upon is that gentleness is akin to weakness. But the second is that gentleness is something that's easy to do—and it is when you've got the wind at your back, when things are going really good.

One of my family's favorite activities is to take my parent's boat on the Mississippi River and go up and down river. And what you notice inevitably is that when you're moving with the current, it's an easy trip. But going back upstream is an entirely different thing. A one-hour trip down river might be three or four back up.

It's easy to be gentle when you've got the wind at your back or when you're moving with the current. You don't really know how gentleness is difficult until you're facing the full force of the current resisting you.

So what I want you to do is turn to your neighbor and tell them under what circumstance it is difficult for you to be gentle.

What we need more of today is courageous gentleness. Make no mistake, gentleness is not akin to weakness. In fact, the Greek New Testament word picture of gentleness is of a war horse that is easily controlled with the bridle in its mouth. So as I was preparing for this sermon looking at gentleness, I saw there are four places where this command for gentleness is displayed in the New Testament: when you're tired, when there's conflict, when there's hurt, and when you're under attack.

This first image is on display in Matthew's gospel. You remember Jesus' words to his disciples when he says, "Take my yoke upon you for I am gentle and lowly of heart, for you will find rest for your souls." What's not as familiar is the setting in which these words are spoken. This is the setting when Jesus has just finished preaching to unrepentant cities and towns. It is the setting where Jesus has just sent his disciples out on their missionary journey. This is the chapter where Jesus' own cousin John the Baptist is doubting whether Jesus really is who he says he is.

"Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?" They are working and asking a lot of Jesus, but the remarkable thing is that even when he was tired, Jesus was still gentle. But when we're weary, that's when we need a courageous gentleness. When I'm tired, I don't know about you, but that's when I'm ready to snap.

The second setting here is when there is conflict, and that's the setting today in the book of Ephesians. The Church in Ephesus struggled with unity and what the apostle Paul

exhorts them **walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

Did you notice in the last passage and in this one, that there is a direct correlation between humility and gentleness? Here's the deal, when you are self-absorbed and self-possessed, you will find it very difficult to be gentle. If all the energy and attention is on yourself, it is very hard for you to be gentle with another.

The next area where the Spirit is cultivating this courageous gentleness is when there is hurt. And this is the setting for Galatians, this is a church that is hurt, this is a church that lacks grace, and Paul, again speaking here, says, **"Brothers and Sisters, you who live by the Spirit restore that person gently."** Someone who has hurt you, someone who violates the commands of God which always has consequences for the people around us. And we're to bring that person back into community, and to do so not harshly, not out of anger, but gently.

The Greek word used here for restore is a medical term for putting a dislocated bone back in place. It is a necessary part of the healing process, but it is a process you want your doctor to perform gently with precision and care.

The fourth setting is when you are under attack. The setting for this one is in 1st Peter when the church is under attack. Peter is being asked to defend the faith and he says, **"Always be ready to give a defense of the faith that you hold, reason for the hope that you have, but do it with gentleness and with respect."** When you are in one of those debate moments and the tensions are high, the atmosphere is contentious, is gentleness your first instinct? How about when you talk about politics? How about when you talk about the current debate about marriage? Is your speech characterized by gentleness?

There is a story about a well-known and well-respected teacher by the name of Dallas Willard, someone I admire and look to. Dallas was in class one day before his students, and one of his students started to lay into him, to challenge Dallas' integrity, his perspective, his opinion, and the accusations quickly turned to a sort of character assassination. Dallas is up in front of the class listening to the student who was saying many falsehoods. He was waiting for the student to run out of ammo. And as soon as the student finished unloading on him in front of the class, Dallas humbly said, "I think that's a good place for us to stop today, class dismissed."

Another student came to him after class and asked why he didn't let him have it, why he didn't defend himself. And Dallas simply said, "Because I was practicing the art of not having the last word."

When you are under attack, are you able to be gentle? What we are seeking in our lives together is to point people to Jesus, who is the gentle and loving Messiah, and if we go about our work harshly and judgmentally, how will they come to know the one who is

gentle? *We can't go about the Lord's work in the devil's way.* If we're going to represent God and reflect his image and character, we have to do it in the way he did it. The Apostle Paul says **rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is at near.**

When God's real presence is near to your heart and mind, you will find it very easy to be gentle. When you are not being gentle, it is a clear indication that you may be far from God. How you own your power, how you use your level of restraint is a clear barometer and measurement of where you are in relationship to God. The connection the Apostle Paul makes here is fascinating: do you think that the almighty God who shaped the cosmos could come near to us without being gentle? God would destroy us, he would overwhelm us. There isn't anything gentler than the incarnation of Jesus; he came as a little child.

Tony Dungy is one of the most successful coaches of his generation and one of the most respected figures in football, and he tells this story about fishing with his dad. One day, he was teaching his boys how to cast when he calmly turned to his Tony's brother and said, "Lyndon, it's important to know not only where other hooks are, but your own." As he said this, Tony's dad calmly removed his brother's hook from his own ear, but he did so calmly and gently. Tony remarks, "I learned something about proper casting that day, but I also learned something about patience and restraint." Can you be tough and tender at the same time? Tony Dungy is one of the toughest gentlemen you'll ever meet, and he learned it from his father, who learned it from his heavenly father.

For the last few weeks, we have seen seismic shifts take place in our community, in our nation, and in the church. And whether it is Charleston, or affordable care, or the redefinition of marriage, pundits from every side of the aisle are arguing and debating and challenging not only one another's opinion, in some cases we're questioning one another's humanity. But for much of the media coverage, what we are seeing is a colossal exercise of missing the point. For we need not get to the bottom of the issue, but we need to get to the basement of our very souls. We need to go to that place where our Lord meets us, individually, in our sin, confronting our blind spots, forming our characters, and learning to live together in peace. We can't do it through new legislation—as good and as helpful as it may be—you will never be able to create a system that is so perfect that we will no longer need to be good to one another. The real battle in our culture is won not in the legislature, but in the pews of our churches, because it is only the gospel that frees us from things like hatred, and empowers us with strength to be gentle.

We are in danger right now of being stern where God is tender, and tender where God is stern. The problem is not just in the culture of sports, but it's in our homes, our workplaces, but even more importantly it's a problem within our own hearts. We can't keep dodging the real question: what does it take for us, you and me, to be workable soil with which God can really do something? It is the tenderness of Christ with the strength of Christ, it is disciplined power, it's gentleness, and it only comes from him.