

*Proverbs 15:1 (NIV)*

A **gentle** answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

*Proverbs 25:15 (NIV)*

<sup>15</sup>Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a **gentle** tongue can break a bone.

*1 Kings 19:12 (NIV)*

<sup>12</sup>After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a **gentle** whisper.

*Matthew 5:5 (NIV)*

<sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek,<sup>1</sup> for they will inherit the earth.

*Matthew 11:28–30 (NIV)*

<sup>28</sup>“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

<sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am **gentle** and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

*Philippians 2:1–11 (NIV)*

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,<sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,<sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. <sup>5</sup>In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup>Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

<sup>7</sup>rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

<sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
<sup>10</sup>that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup>and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

*Gentless?? In our time?*

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<sup>1</sup> “Meekness” is a close cousin of “gentleness” and “humility.” It is hard to speak of one without the other two.

As a fruit of the Spirit, gentleness is profoundly counter to our world today, much less Paul's world. Yes, Paul lived in a culture that was overtly violent and over-sexed, but we today fall too easily into vitriol and the cheapening of human life and dignity. Please take a few minutes and read the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery's* entry on gentleness, before we turn to the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2.

"Gentle" or "gentleness" appears over twenty times in English translations of the Bible. In Proverbs we find two striking images of gentleness in its disarming power: "A gentle tongue can break a bone" (Prov 25:15 NIV) and "a gentle answer turns away wrath" (Prov 15:1 NIV).

The imagery of power and wrath that is so frequently associated with God is penultimate to his ultimate image as one who is gentle and merciful. For Elijah it is not the fierce wind or the fearsome earthquake or the blazing fire of Sinai that bears the word of God but the "gentle whisper" (1 Kings 19:12 NIV). Gentleness is an image of God's ultimate subversive power that undercuts the power structures of this world. This is seen when Jesus, adopting imagery evocative of personified Wisdom in the apocryphal book of Sirach 51:23–26, describes himself as "gentle and humble in heart," his "yoke is easy" and his "burden is light" (Mt 11:29). James, in much the same vein, speaks of wisdom "from above" as "gentle" as well as "peacable," "willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits" (Jas 3:17 NRSV). Within the Bible we find gentleness associated with love and kindness (Acts 27:13; 1 Thess 2:7; 1 Tim 3:3; Phil 4:5; Col 3:12), meekness (Jer 11:19; Zech 9:9; 2 Cor 10:1) and humility (Eph 4:2; 1 Pet 3:4).

Paul, the formerly zealous persecutor of the church, recognizes that gentleness does not come naturally for many. He explicitly lists gentleness as a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23), a virtue that is planted and flourishes where God dwells by his Spirit. It is to be "put on" with other Christian virtues such as compassion, lowliness and patience (Col 3:12). Gentleness is Paul's preferred means of dealing with the church at Corinth: "What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of Gentleness?" (1 Cor 4:21). In speaking of his ministry among the Thessalonians, Paul's gentleness takes on maternal imagery: "like a nurse taking care of her children" (1 Thess 2:7). If gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit, it is certainly a quality to be sought in church leaders (1 Tim 3:3; 2 Tim 2:25; cf. Heb 5:2). Even sinners are to be restored to the community with gentleness (Gal 6:1). The picture of believers, individually and corporately, is of a gentle people who follow in the footsteps of their gentle Lord and master. Clearly this is not a gentleness that is naive or spineless but a gentleness that lives with principled firmness like the innocence of doves lives with the shrewdness of snakes (Mt 10:16).<sup>2</sup>

### *Gentleness and humility*

I find it very hard to pull apart gentleness and humility in practice. Jesus saw this in himself as he spoke about the Father being revealed in the Son (Matthew 11:25-30):

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<sup>2</sup> Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 325–326.

<sup>25</sup> At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. <sup>26</sup> Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

<sup>27</sup> “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

<sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, **for I am gentle and humble in heart**, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

So we should not be surprised to learn that Paul calls us to be like Christ in our humility and gentleness. If you want to know where to begin studying Paul’s theology of Jesus, the place is Philippians 2:1-11.

### *Humble . . . and gentle . . . like Christ*

In today’s passage from Philippians, Paul urges the Philippian Christians to be of one mind with each other and to strive to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. As we read on, we see what Paul means; even a cursory glance at verses 6-8 of the Christ-hymn (6-11) reveals the answer. Jesus set aside his equality with God. He emptied<sup>3</sup> and humbled himself. He was obedient even to the point of death on a cross. And this obedience entailed gentleness even as he stood before Caiaphas and Pilate. Was overt violence or even demeaning language Jesus’ way just hours before his death? You know the answer.

This is about as hard a teaching as they come. It would be nice if, after urging us to have the same mind as Jesus, Paul had given us a few rules to follow or some thoughts on Christian ethics. Instead, we get a call to utter and complete humility wrapped up in a big dose of theology.

Philippians is filled with Paul’s teachings about how the disciples of Jesus Christ are to live – be selfless, stay humble, pray about everything, be content in all things, think about what is true and good and honorable and excellent, and so on. Yet, in this Christ-hymn there seems to be no moral teachings at all, no “do’s and don’ts.” We are ready for Paul to tell us why we ought to be selfless – and all we get is verse after verse of theology! Jesus was “in the form of God” . . . Jesus “emptied himself” . . . Jesus was “found in human form” . . . all this theology.

But this is Paul’s way. When Christians brought Paul a practical question, he was likely to give them a theological answer. The Corinthians came to Paul with questions about eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols – and he began his answer with this: “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:9). Paul understood that we cannot separate what we believe from what we do. He forces us to hold together our

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<sup>3</sup>We get too consumed with trying to tease out the meaning of “form” or “emptying,” wondering whether Paul is talking about Jesus’ surrendering his omniscience or omnipotence. But this is not Paul’s point. As Morna Hooker wrote, “Christ did not cease to be in the ‘form of God’ when he took the form of a slave, any more than he ceased to be the ‘Son of God’ when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, it is *in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like.*” Want to know what God is like? Look at the humble, obedient, sacrificing Jesus.

theology and our morality. We seek the truth about God and ourselves, but always in the service of discipleship. So, after calling the Philippians to selflessness, Paul reminds them of Christ's selflessness and all that he willingly surrendered for us.

How does God respond to Jesus' "obedience to the point of death – even death on a cross"? God does so triumphantly, exalting Jesus above all others. Jesus is Lord. It is he to whom "every knee should bend" and "every tongue confess."

### *Embracing gentleness and humility*

Humility, surrendering our rights and privileges, obedience, death – who wants that? Gentle? Ha! You'll never win that way. . . . We want to win, achieve, triumph, succeed. We want more rights, more privileges. We've earned them! We deserve them. In the immortal words of Veruca Salt, "I want it and I want it now!"

This is the sin of the so-called "Health and Wealth gospel." Prosperity preachers promise full bank accounts and healthy bodies in exchange for belief (and a large donation). Yet, Paul points us in a completely different direction. The Christian path is about gentleness, humility, and obedient faithfulness; further, we should expect that faithfulness to take us down the way of suffering. Perhaps this is why wealth in the gospels is not about reward but warning.

So, the question to us is whether we will welcome Paul's challenge to have the mind of Christ, even if it looks like losing. Certainly, to those in Jerusalem on a Friday two thousand years ago, it looked like Jesus had lost to the chief priests and Pilate.

Will we strive each day to be obedient? Will we seek to learn what God desires from us? Will we rise to the challenge of our own God-given vocation? Will we regard others, all others, as better than ourselves, putting aside selfish ambition and conceit (2:4)? Will we put the interests of others ahead of our own, even if it means we "lose" (2:5)? Will we embrace the gentle humility of obedient faith?

## **Scott Engle's Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Ruth*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *Acts*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

#### *About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

This week: Week 3 -- *The Atheist Delusion: Science, the Bible, and the Truth in Which We Live*.

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.