

# BUILDING CHARACTER: On Being Gentle

## A Study of Matthew 5:5

Characteristic of Completeness: Gentleness

Big Idea: You're better off not going off.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 37; Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 11:29; 2 Corinthians 10:1; Galatians 5:22-23; 6:1; Ephesians 4:1-3; Colossians 3:12-13; 2 Timothy 2:24-25; Titus 3:1-2; James 1:21; 1 Peter 3:4, 15

### Introduction

1. How should we respond to those who provoke us? How should we react when somebody pushes our buttons? When people aggravate us, how should we treat them?

Right up front, I am going to give you a biblical answer to these questions. I'm going to disclose the bottom line. I'm going to present Jesus' answer.

And then, I'm going to spend the rest of the time explaining and proving the answer. Because, when I tell you what it is, you're going to have all kinds of questions and you might not even believe me.

To the question, how should we respond to those who provoke us?, the answer is this: We should respond *gently* to those who provoke us, knowing that God will reward our gentleness. That is, when people push our buttons, we should treat them with kindness, counting on the promise that God will make it worthwhile for us. In short, ► the big idea is this: You're better off not going off. When someone gets your goat, you're better off not going off on them in retaliation.

Our Characteristic of Completeness for the week is ► Gentleness. That's what we're talking about: Gentleness.

2. I get all this from a single verse. It's Matthew 5:5. If you have your Bibles, I invite you to turn there. Our text is ► Matthew 5:5. Jesus says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth."

My sermon this morning is built around ► three questions relating to this verse and my big idea: what, where, and why. *What* does it mean to be gentle? *Where* is the provocation? And *why* are we better off being gentle?

- I. First ► things first. What does it mean to be gentle? What does gentleness involve?
  - A. Gentleness is strength under control. Gentleness is power restrained. Gentleness is the will surrendered. The Greek word for "gentle" is the "quality of not being overly

impressed by a sense of one's self-importance."<sup>1</sup> It involves a gentle friendliness and consideration toward others; it's a "strength that accommodates to another's weakness."<sup>2</sup> One scholar observes, "The word never connotes the idea of weakness. Rather, it implies the conscious exercise of self control, exhibiting a conscious choice of gentleness as opposed to the use of power for the purpose of retaliation."<sup>3</sup>

- B. In ancient Greek literature, the word "gentle" was used to describe a tame horse.<sup>4</sup> In the day in which Jesus spoke the words in our text, soldiers would ride war horses into battle. A war horse provides a good picture of gentleness.<sup>5</sup> The horses were trained to be perfectly submissive, gentle, and obedient to their masters, even when provoked in the heat of battle. The horses were by no means weak, but they were gentle. They are examples of strength under control. Similarly, we are gentle when we are entirely submissive to the Master's reins.
- C. Jesus Himself is our human model for what gentleness looks like. During His ministry on earth, Jesus described Himself as gentle.<sup>6</sup>

When Jesus came to Jerusalem for the last time, He could have come with great pomp and circumstance. After all, He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He came instead on a lowly donkey. That's gentle.

When hundreds of Roman soldiers and an angry Jewish mob sought to apprehend and crucify Jesus, they discovered Him in the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>7</sup> He was betrayed by the kiss of His own disciple, Judas. In keeping with God's plan, Jesus surrendered Himself to the soldiers and the mob. And perhaps to show us that He did not surrender out of weakness, Jesus healed the ear of one of His captors. And as He identified Himself as the one they were looking for, uttering the simple words, "I am," the entire detachment of troops and everyone in the mob involuntarily fell on their backsides. I think it's a reminder to us that Jesus still had all the power of God. But it was power under control. That's gentle.

Then on the cross, in excruciating pain, Jesus did not seek revenge, nor did He revile or insult His opponents. Rather, He prayed on their behalf for forgiveness.<sup>8</sup> That's gentle.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. "πραΰτης," (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. "πραΰτης," (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 507.

<sup>4</sup> *The Abridged Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "πραΰς."

<sup>5</sup> Max Anders, *The Good Life: Living With Meaning in a "Never-Enough" World*, (Dallas, London, Vancouver, Melbourne: Word Publishing, 1993), 87.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 11:29.

<sup>7</sup> See Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-52; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:2-11.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 23:34.

Gentleness is strength under control.

- II. That brings us to ► the second question: Where is the provocation? Remember, I said we should respond gently to those who provoke us, those who aggravate us, those who egg us on. And you may be wondering: Where do you get being provoked from the text? Where is provocation in view? Good question. I want to show you how I link gentleness with being provoked. And then I want to show you where provocation shows up in life.

In studying for this sermon, I looked up all of the places in the Bible where the Greek word for “gentle” or “gentleness” appears. I discovered that gentleness almost always has some kind of provocation in view. When the Bible calls us to be gentle, it is usually in the face of some form of antagonism. In fact, when you track down all the places where gentleness appears, you end up with helpful list of places and relationships and situations where provocation shows up in our lives.

- A. This was a little surprising to me because I had initially missed the clues pointing to provocation in Matthew 5:5. So I went back to look more closely. Let me trace my discovery.

1. I remembered, first of all, that the original hearers of Jesus’ words and the original readers of Matthew’s gospel were first-century Jews—Jews who felt a strong entitlement to the Promised Land because God had given the land to them.

But while many Jews lived within the land promised to them by God, they didn’t really own it. It wasn’t under their control. They were merely frustrated tenants because the often oppressive Roman Empire was then in control of the land.

In fact, at the time when Matthew was written, Jews were so fed up and angry with Roman governmental corruption and oppression, they were on the brink of revolt. Matthew was probably written in the 60s AD.<sup>9</sup> And we know from history that, from 66-70 AD, the Jews did indeed revolt against Rome.<sup>10</sup> The revolt was ultimately put down in 70 AD and Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans.

So, the original readers of Matthew were first-century Jews provoked by an oppressive government that controlled their land. In the face of this governmental provocation, many Jews were ready to go off on the Romans.

Now listen to the words of Jesus in our text and consider how first century Jews would have taken them:

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<sup>9</sup> Wayne House, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 17.

<sup>10</sup> House, 53.

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:5 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.”

The Greek word for ► “earth” could legitimately be translated “land.” In fact, one of the most prominent Greek lexicons indicates that Matthew 5:5 is a reference not to the whole earth, but to the Promised Land.<sup>11</sup> What’s more, the word ► “inherit” appears in the Old Testament most commonly in connection with taking possession of the Promised Land.<sup>12</sup>

So these Jews are being provoked by the Romans to the point that they are about to go off on them to try to take back their land. And now they are reminded by Matthew of the ethics of Jesus the King: Be gentle in the face of provocation. You’re better off not going off.

2. This is not the only place in the Bible where we are called to be gentle in the face of governmental provocation. The Apostle Paul, writing at about the same time, confirms that we are to respond to governmental provocation gently. In ► Titus 3:1-2, he speaks of believers in a place called Crete, saying,

<sup>NAU</sup> Titus 3:1 Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, 2 to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men.

Paul is saying that believers ought to be gentle toward rulers and authorities. And it’s important to know who was in office at the time when Paul wrote his letter to Titus and when Matthew wrote his gospel to Jews.

It was Nero. Nero ruled the Roman Empire. Let ► me give you a brief description of Nero to show you just how bad he was.

*Nero started things off with a bang by poisoning his fourteen-year-old stepbrother. . . . He carried on a couple of very public affairs. In time he had his ambitious mother murdered. He got married but then had his first wife murdered as well.*

*. . . Nero was known for cavorting in the streets of Rome at all hours of the night and early morning. He loved to race chariots and also fancied himself a great actor; the theater crowds obligingly applauded even as they winced at his lack of talent.*

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<sup>11</sup> BDAG, s.v. “γῆ.”

<sup>12</sup> Based on a lemma search on “κληρονομέω” in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

*. . . when Rome went up in flames in A.D. 64, Nero pointed to the Christians as a handy scapegoat, which unleashed vicious persecution. . . .*

*Meanwhile, Nero ran the empire into serious debt; his gifts to various friends each year mounted up to five times the cost of maintaining the whole Roman army. When the senate finally began laying groundwork to impeach him, Nero, then thirty years old, avoided further embarrassment by slitting his own throat. He left the treasury bankrupt and the soldiers well behind in their pay.<sup>13</sup>*

And Nero is believed to be the guy who issued the decree that led to the execution of the apostles Peter and Paul. In this context, the words of Jesus ring:

<sup>NAU</sup> Matthew 5:5 “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.”

3. In the face of governmental provocation, being gentle is not about being a silent doormat. Being gentle is not about shying away from calling for needed change. Indeed, some of the greatest social reformers were gentle. Like Gandhi. And Martin Luther King. Strong, but under control.

King put his finger on an important element of gentleness. He said that gentleness or nonviolence “will save [us] . . . from seeking to substitute one tyranny for another.”<sup>14</sup> That is to say, in the face of a bully, the gentle refuse to become bullies.

King knew greater provocation than most of us ever will.

*Southern sheriffs delighted in roughing [him] up . . . They clubbed his marchers with nightsticks, sicced German shepherd dogs on them, blasted them with water canons that cracked ribs and sent bodies sprawling on the streets.*

*A deranged woman stabbed him in New York, her weapon lodging a fraction of an inch from his aorta. A white man in Birmingham rushed the platform and pummeled King with his fists. (“Don’t touch him!” King cried to his supporters, who surrounded the attacker. “We have to pray for him.”)<sup>15</sup>*

<sup>13</sup> Dean Merrill, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry Church: Finding a Better Way to Influence Our Culture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 34-35.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church*, (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Yancey, 25.

That's gentle.

4. Are we gentle?

I wonder. How do you think our unbelieving culture views the current political activism of professing Christians? Would unbelievers describe us with words like "peaceable" and "humble" and "gentle?" Or would they use words like, "shrill," and "self-righteous," and "junk-yard dog." Taking up a good cause with a bad attitude is unbiblical, unproductive, and ungodly. An unloving attitude can be as damaging as the immorality it opposes.

- B. And government or politics certainly isn't the only place where provocation can show up. I mentioned that the Bible provides us with a helpful list. I'm going to quickly reel off seven more places or relationships or situations where provocation shows up in our lives, where we are to be gentle.

For example, we are to be gentle when we catch someone sinning. That is, when we discover that a fellow believer is acting out in wrongful, immoral ways, we are to gently restore, not angrily retaliate. Galatians ► 6:1 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Galatians 6:1 Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness . . .

- C. Also, ► we are to be gentle when others in the church irritate us. That is, we are to be gentle with those who have offended us—those against whom we have a complaint. Colossians ► 3:12-13 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Colossians 3:12 . . . put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

- D. We ► are also to be gentle when our opponents in the church are wrong. That's right. We are to be gentle with believers who oppose us, even when we know they are dead wrong. In ► 2 Timothy 2:24-25, we are told:

<sup>NAU</sup> 2 Timothy 2:24 The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, 25 with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth,

- E. We ► are also to be gentle with others when life is so hard that we think we have reason to be cranky. We are not to take out our hardship on other people. We are to

be gentle, looking to God for strength and wisdom in trials, not looking for somebody to go off on. That's what I think ► James 1:21 is saying:

<sup>NAU</sup> James 1:21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and *all* that remains of wickedness, in humility [that is, in gentleness] receive the word implanted . . .  
<sup>16</sup>

- F. We ► are also to be gentle when unbelievers persecute us for our faith. When others poke fun at our puny intellect or equate us with the most embarrassing Christians, we should respond gently. First ► Peter 3:14-15 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> 1 Peter 3:14 But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, ► 15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence

- G. We ► are also to be gentle when our competence is questioned. We are to respond in gentleness even to the person who impugns our reputation or declares us unfit. Some in the church at ancient Corinth questioned the competence of the Apostle Paul. They said he was a lousy preacher. They said he was too wimpy to be a true apostle. In ► 2 Corinthians 10:1, Paul addresses them this way:

<sup>NAU</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:1 Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ . . .

- H. Finally, ► we are to be gentle even when our spouse is not following the Lord. In 1 Peter 3, wives are addressed, particularly wives of husbands who aren't following the Lord (Verse 1: "disobedient to the word"). In the face of the provocation of a wayward spouse, ► Verse 4 encourages this trait:

<sup>NAU</sup> 1 Peter 3:4 . . . the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.

Being gentle does not mean that wives ought to allow their husbands to abuse them. It does not mean that wives ought to enable their husbands' sin. It does mean that we do not return evil for evil.

- III. We ► have seen that gentleness is strength under control, particularly in the face of provocation. And that provocation shows up in many different places and relationships and situations. Now, I want to deal with ► the third and final question: Why are we better off being gentle? Why is gentleness beneficial?

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<sup>16</sup> The context of this verse has to do with dealing with trials (James 1:2-3).

This is an important question because often gentleness does *not* seem to work. Being gentle does *not* seem to pay. The spoils seem to go to the arrogant, the bullies, the aggressors. And we're sorely tempted to adopt their tactics because they seem to work; the bullies appear to get away with bad stuff. They are the ones who seem to profit—so much so that the famous philosopher Nietzsche mockingly turned this beatitude of Jesus on its head, saying: “Assert yourself; it is the arrogant who take over the earth.”<sup>17</sup>

But I want to show you that we are better off being gentle because God will surely reward our gentleness. God will make sure our gentleness is worth it. In being gentle, we win. Let me build the case.

A. In Matthew 5:5, Jesus is actually alluding to Psalm 37. Psalm ► 37:11 says,

<sup>NAU</sup> Psalm 37:11 . . . the humble will inherit the land . . .

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the words in Psalm 37:11 correspond with the words in Matthew 5:5. The words ► “humble” in Psalm 37:11 and “gentle” Matthew 5:5 come from the same Greek word. The words ► “land” in Psalm 37:11 and “earth” Matthew 5:5 come from the same Greek word.

To ancient Jews, ► the phrase “inherit the land” came “to denote the tranquil and stable possession of the holy land crowned with all divine blessings, an experience which pious Israelites were to expect under the Messiah.”<sup>18</sup> And in Psalm 37, the phrase “inherit the land” occurs five times (9, 11, 22, 29, 34). It's a theme. So, it is clear that Jesus is recalling the blessings of Psalm 37 to the Jewish mind.

Which raises the question: What's the point of Psalm 37? Well, it's forty verses long, so let me summarize the recurring message. Psalm 37 tells us: Rest assured that the gentle will ultimately be blessed by God; the bullies will not. Don't worry when the bullies seem to have the upper hand; in the end, they will not prevail, but the gentle will be victorious. In being gentle, we'll get what God has promised to us; the bullies will get what's coming to them. Gentleness pays. Listen to this excerpt from ► Psalm 37:

<sup>NAU</sup> Psalm 37:1 Do not fret because of evildoers, Be not envious toward wrongdoers. 2 For they will wither quickly like the grass And fade like the green herb.

► <sup>NAU</sup> Psalm 37:10 Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; And you will look carefully for his place and he will not be *there*. 11 But the

<sup>17</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *The Christian Salt and Light Company*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Discover House Publishers, 1988), 50.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. “κληρονομέω” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977).

humble [the gentle] will inherit the land And will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

God says the gentle will prosper.

- B. I ► can almost hear some people thinking, “Well, okay. I guess I can see that the gentle might be rewarded *in heaven*, but here on earth it looks like they still get the shaft.”

While it may be true that the gentle may not be fully rewarded until they get to heaven, I want to show you that the gentle are better off than the bullies, even in this life. Gentleness pays on earth as it does in heaven. You’re still better off not going off.

1. In the first century, Christians would have considered the Roman Empire to be the bully. Let me ask you: Where is Christianity today, and where is the Roman Empire? Christianity prevailed; the bully did not.
2. And consider this. We have a Martin Luther King Day. We honor the memory of his gentle reformation. Name one bully reformer that has his own day. And which bully reformer had a greater impact than the gentle Gandhi?
3. Even in nature, the seeming bullies do not prevail. You’d think lions and tigers would be in control and sheep would be near extinction. You’d think eagles rather than sparrows would rule. But it’s the lions and tigers and eagles that are endangered species. There are plenty of lambs and sparrows around.<sup>19</sup>
4. You could argue that some bullies attract admirers. Like gang leaders, or corporate big dogs, or even some church leaders who like to intimidate and push people around. But I would argue that bullies are often the loneliest most miserable people on earth. Bullying kills any kind of true relational intimacy. To whom would you go to share your deepest secrets, your greatest concerns, your innermost questions? To the gentle. The gentle are safe. The gentle can be trusted. Gentleness fosters intimacy in relationships.

And I want to say that gentleness excludes all forms of interpersonal retaliation and revenge, including the sneaky ones that can be falsely labeled gentleness. Like the quiet snub. Or passive aggression. Or withdrawal as punishment. Or calm nagging. Or withholding yourself as manipulation. If it’s intimacy you want in your relationships, bullying dressed up like gentleness won’t work. Only true gentleness fosters intimacy. Pray for gentleness, recognizing that the only bully you can make repent is you. And you will be blessed when you do.

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<sup>19</sup> Robinson, 54-55.

So you see, we should respond *gently* to those who provoke us, knowing that God will reward our gentleness. When people push our buttons, we should treat them with kindness, counting on the promise that God will make it worthwhile for us. It's true: You're better off not going off.

How appropriate on the eve of Thanksgiving, a holiday that often serves up a cornucopia of family conflict. Maybe this year, this week, you can change that by serving up the gentleness of Christ.