

# GENTLENESS



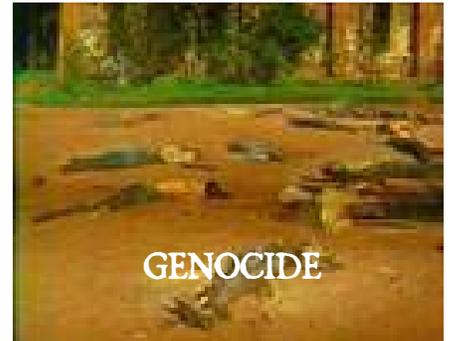
THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS LOVE, JOY, PEACE,  
PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GENEROSITY, FAITHFULNESS,  
GENTLENESS, AND SELF-CONTROL . . .

IF WE LIVE BY THE SPIRIT,  
LET US ALSO BE GUIDED BY THE SPIRIT

GALATIANS 5: 22-25

An estimated 1.9 million women and 3.2 million men are physically assaulted annually in the United States.

—US Dept of Justice Survey



Let them imitate the Lord, who at the very time of his passion was not more proud but more humble, for he washed his disciples feet.

CYPRIAN  
OF  
CARTHAGE

9



# GENTLENESS

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”  
James 3:13

## The Theme

Our culture glorifies strength and power, competition and aggression. Self-promotion and intimidation are considered necessary to “get ahead” in the classroom, on the playing field, or in the job market. Gentleness is considered a form of weakness—hardly something to be cultivated.

## The Word

- ◆ **DAY 1: Read Matthew 18:1-5 (*become like little children*)**  
Keep in mind that the fruit translated as gentleness in the NRSV can also be translated as meekness or humility.
- ◆ **DAY 2: Read Matthew 11:28-29; Philippians 2:3-11 (*gentleness as humility*)**  
Consider what Jesus means by promising rest as a result of taking on his gentle heart. What kind of gentleness does the writer of Philippians expect of Jesus’ followers?
- ◆ **DAY 3: Read John 13:1-15 (*gentleness in action*)**  
As you read the account of the foot washing, imagine Jesus taking your feet in his hands. How does that image explain gentleness in terms of humility?
- ◆ **DAY 4: Read James 3 (*gentleness in speech*)**  
Look for the connection the writer makes between gentleness in speech and wisdom.
- ◆ **Day 5: Read Chapter 9 in *Life On the Vine*** Pay particular attention to the last paragraph on page 205. It provides a cogent summary of God’s character revealed in Christ. After reading the chapter, work through the study guide on the following pages.

LIFE ON THE VINE

## The Book

Football stadiums. Saturday morning cartoons. Workplaces. Music videos. Toy stores. Movie theaters. Living rooms and kitchens. Computer games. School classrooms. Novels. Friday night dates. Network news programs. What do all these have in common? At least one thing: they are all primary venues for the staggering amount of violence—both real and fictional—that permeates our lives . . . . We are both the most violent society in the world and the one that immerses itself most deeply in portrayals of violence—a connection which, though difficult to demonstrate, hardly seems coincidental. . . .

Although our society unapologetically fosters aggression and self-promotion in many conspicuous ways, some obstacles to a life of gentleness and humility are less obvious. These more subtle ones, I suspect, are the ones that are most invisible even to many Christians . . . . What subtle effect on the cultivation of gentleness and humility, for example, is produced by a mindset that assumes that one can only make a real difference in the world if one is in a position of power, if one is in a position to set the agenda? How does such a mindset encourage us to think about those in our society who are not now (and will likely never be) so positioned? Finally, how does our ambition, our single-minded desire to ascend to the top, encourage us to treat those we pass up along the way? With gentleness and humility? Not likely.

(Kenneson, pp. 199–200, 211)

# The STUDY GUIDE

## Exploring the Roots of Gentleness

Reflect for a moment on your experiences with small children—in their own homes, in a nursery setting, as parents, grandparents, or care givers. Make a mental list of the attributes that characterize young children.

Recall how Jesus interacts with the children in Matthew 18:1-5.

- ◆ What does Jesus see in children that his disciples—and many in his day—did not see?
- ◆ In proclaiming children as an example to emulate, what did Jesus mean for his disciples to change about themselves?
- ◆ What do children have to teach us about gentleness, meekness, and humility?

## Examining the Challenges of Gentleness

### *Character of the Fruit*

Thus far the starting point for studying the character of the fruits of the Spirit has been the character of God. With the fruit of gentleness we start with the character of Jesus to get to the character of God.

Reread Matthew 11:28-29. Then read the following excerpt from Kenneson's book:

*“When we look for a king born of royalty, we find instead a baby wrapped in strips of cloth lying in a manger, born to a peasant girl of no account. When Jesus' time has come to begin his ministry and we look for him to put John the Baptizer in his place, we find instead a Jesus who humbly approaches John in order to be baptized by him. When we look for Jesus to take the world by storm, to win over those who have power, influence and prestige in order to advance his kingdom more efficiently, we find instead an itinerant preacher and healer who spends much of his time with the weak and outcast of society: children, lepers, prostitutes and tax-collectors. When we see Jesus rejected by the Samaritans, we look for him to do what his disciples wanted done—to rain down fire upon them—but instead he rebukes us. When we look for the conquering hero to make his move, to enter into the royal city on his white charger to signal to the*

*people that the time has come to establish his kingdom, we find instead a Jesus who enters into Jerusalem astride a humble donkey. When we gather with him for the last time in that upper room, expecting to get our marching orders and to honor him by pledging our allegiance to him, we find instead that he honors us by washing our feet and by calling us his friends. When Jesus is arrested and taken before the authorities, we look for him to set those authorities straight, to proclaim proudly and defiantly that he is God's anointed one; instead we find him strangely silent, showing no need to justify himself. When we look for a deliverer who will crush the opposition by superior force, we find instead a servant-messiah who allows himself to be crushed and bruised for us. What kind of God is this?"*

- ◆ How does Kenneson's description of the gospel of Jesus' life reveal Jesus as "gentle and humble in heart"?
- ◆ Thinking about Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28-29, how would you summarize what Jesus wants his disciples to learn from him?

Focus on the footwashing photograph on page 2 of the participant guide while imagining the scene described in John 13:1-15. Imagine Jesus holding your feet in his hands . . .

- ◆ What message does Jesus' act of humility in washing feet send to our culture today?
- ◆ What should the humility and gentleness expressed in Jesus' washing his disciples' feet look like among Jesus' disciples today?
- ◆ Where or in whom have you witnessed a footwashing kind of humility?

### ***Obstacles to Bearing Fruit***

Read the survey statistic and look at the images of violence and destruction at the top of the Participant Guide page 1. Consider Kenneson's statement in the excerpt on Participant Guide page 3:

*"We are both the most violent society in the world and the one that immerses itself most deeply in portrayals of violence."*

- ◆ What are the real challenges violence in society poses for the cultivation of gentleness, humility, and meekness in daily life?
- ◆ Where in your own life are you most aware of the drive to get ahead, to be assertive, to strive for power and control, clashing with the biblical concept of gentleness?

## Bearing the Fruit of Gentleness in the World

Kenneson highlights three resources able to help the church—us—cultivate the fruit of gentleness and humility.

- (1) a posture of prayer
- (2) a pattern of yielding in speech and act
- (3) a practice of hospitality

Spend some time discussing specific ways these three resources can help the cultivation of gentleness.

- ◆ When was the last time you prayed for someone you would consider an adversary, someone who has hurt you in some way?
- ◆ When have you experienced the transformation of your heart or another's from anger to gentleness?

**Consider making an effort this next week to pray for enemies as well as friends—on your knees.**

- ◆ Read James 3:10-17. When is the last time you yielded to another in a war of words?
- ◆ How does this congregation deal with conflicts and controversy? To what extent is “willingness to yield and to leave the results up to God” part of your congregational character?

**Consider in a future conflict or argument, resisting the temptation to attack; instead try to yield. Gently. Humbly. See what happens.**

- ◆ Kenneson observes that the gentleness and humility modeled by Christ is displayed in acts of hospitality. When was the last time you welcomed one of “the least of these,” a child, the lowly, the stranger?

**Consider spending time in the next few weeks with someone you tend to ignore or exclude. Pray for the power and perspective to reach out to them in humility.**