

Dave Johnson

Sermon: “The Gentleness of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 4:5)

October 9, 2011

Today I will be preaching from the fourth chapter of Philippians. The church at Philippi was the first church in Europe. In Acts 16 we read about the founding of this church during Paul’s second missionary journey. Paul had a special affection for the church at Philippi and in 62 A.D. while imprisoned in Rome, he wrote them the letter that eventually became a part of the New Testament.

Often sermons on the fourth chapter of Philippians focus on rejoicing (“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice”) or prayer (“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God”) or peace (“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”). This sermon however, will be on a verse that is often overlooked in this passage, verse five, in which Paul writes, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”

Paul did not instruct the church at Philippi, “Let your passion be known to everyone” or “Let your intensity be known to everyone” or “Let your beautiful buildings and stellar programs be known to everyone;” but rather, “Let your *gentleness* be known to everyone.”

We live in a world in which gentleness is often wanting. Think about your life for a moment. How often are you treated with gentleness? Or how often you are treated harshly or in a way that is overbearing or manipulative or controlling? I bet the latter is more common for you than the former. The world is full of bullies.

When I was in kindergarten I rode the bus to school, and every morning I had a knot in my stomach as I walked to the bus stop because there was a bully awaiting me there named Eric. He would push me around, make fun of my crooked teeth, knock my lunch out my hands and other assorted things that helped my day get off to a great start. When the bus arrived at school I would sprint past Eric and into the school building and when the bus arrived back to the bus stop after school I would sprint past Eric and run home. He was much bigger than me, but at least I could outrun him—it’s amazing how fast you can run when you’re scared ☺.

And you know from your own life that the bullying does not stop in kindergarten. I imagine that even now each of you can recall specific bullies from elementary school or the mean girls or angst-ridden bullies of high school (two film examples: Lindsay Lohan’s foes in *Mean Girls*, and Biff, who tormented McFly in *Back to the Future*). As adults, how many of you have worked for someone who bullied you, or who had a way of belittling you and reminding you who was in charge?

Or perhaps you can think of marriages in which husbands bully their wives by being narcissistic or overbearing, or in which wives bully their husbands by being controlling or passive-aggressive. Perhaps you can think of parents who bully their young children in different ways, or who bully their grown children by making sure they know what a disappointment they are.

Even in the church bullying abounds. There are many clergy who preach bullying sermons from their bully pulpits, or who treat people in the church harshly or as cogs in their self-centered ministry machine. On the flip-side there are also many clergy who are bullied by influential lay leaders who consistently undermine them and want to see them fail. Some years ago I had a friend who was a priest—faithful, kind, gifted—who was bullied by the lay leadership in his church for ten years straight. He burned out and left the ministry—what a loss.

All of us know what it's like to walk reluctantly with knots in our stomachs to the various bus stops in our lives or how tiring it can be to try and outrun the bullies. All this bullying can leave us in a place where we long for some gentleness.

In the late 80's five rock-n-roll icons—Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, Jeff Lynne, Roy Orbison, and George Harrison—formed a band they called the Travelling Wilburys. Their biggest hit, *Handle with Care*, expresses this longing for gentleness. Here are some of the lyrics:

Been beat up and battered 'round
Been sent up, and I've been shot down
You're the best thing that I've ever found
Handle me with care

I've been fobbed off, and I've been fooled
I've been robbed and ridiculed
In day care centers and night schools
Handle me with care

Been stuck in airports, terrorized
Sent to meetings, hypnotized
Overexposed, commercialized
Handle me with care

When I was in middle school I attended a very small, strict Christian school. Allow me to juxtapose two teachers from that school. Teacher number one... the Bible teacher was a big intimidating former football coach. One day during class I was sitting in my usual place, the very back row, cutting up with one of my friends. Suddenly the teacher stopped talking and a scared silence filled the room, particularly me, when I noticed he was glaring at me. Without taking his eyes off me, he slowly walked to where I was sitting, grabbed my shirt, and stood me up on my tip toes. Without letting go of my hair he led me to an empty chair in the middle of the front row and sat me down. Then he got in my face and told me that was my new permanent

seat. I was so scared, but on the upside I was thankful I had maintained control of my bodily fluids ☺. I learned all sorts of “helpful” theology in that class, like the fact that God saw everything I did and that my sin would find me out and that I would reap what I sowed and that I was either predestined to heaven or hell (only God knew for sure) and that I’d better behave or else God would punish me... all very helpful for an awkward twelve-year old.

Teacher number two... the Latin teacher was a kind soft-spoken man. Latin was one of my favorite classes, not so much because I enjoyed declining nouns and conjugating verbs (although that was quite thrilling), but because there was a stunning girl named Lisa in the class, and I had the privilege of sitting in the desk right behind hers. These were the days before texting and one beautiful spring day, although the teacher was giving an inspired lecture on the pluperfect tense, I began writing a long note to Lisa, gushing poetically about her beauty, completely absorbed by my emerging masterpiece, utterly oblivious to anything else around me. Suddenly my teacher’s hand was on my desk and I watched in helpless horror as he took the note away. His policy was if he caught you writing or passing a note in class he would read it aloud to the class, and our class had heard him read many a juicy note. Now it was my turn. I didn’t turn red, I turned purple. “Here it comes,” I thought as I slunk down into my desk, “My life is about to be ruined.” The teacher silently read the note, all of it, the class eagerly waiting to hear it read. After a moment, instead of reading it aloud, he smiled, slowly folded it and put it in his pocket, and gently said, “Nicely done, but if you could focus on Latin for a few minutes I’d really appreciate it.” That was it. As he continued teaching about the fascinating nuances of the pluperfect tense I felt incredibly relieved, my life was not ruined after all. I would have conjugated a thousand verbs for that man ☺.

Two teachers... the one intimidated me in the name of Jesus; the other treated me with the gentleness of Jesus. I imagine you could share similar stories.

Here’s the good news: Jesus is not a bully.

Jesus is gentle. Jesus handles us with care.

Jesus did not bully people during his earthly ministry. He was gentle with them, and handled them with care. Jesus was moved with compassion for people who were bullied, people who “were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). That’s why people were drawn to him, especially those who had been bullied. Lepers whom most people would not even acknowledge, Jesus would gently touch. Little children, whom the disciples simply wanted to be rid of, were gently welcomed by Jesus into his arms. To a woman caught in adultery whom the Pharisees wanted to stone to death, Jesus gently said, “Neither do I condemn you... go and sin no more.”

Jesus was gentle and handled people with care; he would “not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick” (Matthew 12:20); he was sent “to proclaim release to the captives” and “to let

the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). Instead of bullying the weak and oppressed, Jesus stood up for them and warned the bullying Pharisees against burdening them with their legalism.

Jesus was gentle and handled people with care. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,” he said, “and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am *gentle*... and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29).

Jesus did not say, “Learn from me, for I am intense” or “Learn from me, for I am overbearing” or “Learn from me, for I am intimidating” or “Learn from me, for I am manipulative.”

“Learn from me for I am *gentle*,” he said, “and you will find rest for your souls.”

In response to the gentleness with which Jesus treats us, we are called to be gentle with others: “Let your gentleness be known to everyone,” Paul writes.

This is the work of the Holy Spirit. In the same way the Holy Spirit enables us to love others in response to God loving us (John 15:12) and to welcome others in response to God welcoming us (Romans 15:7) and to forgive others in response to God forgiving us (Ephesians 4:32), the Holy Spirit bears the fruit of gentleness in our lives and enables us to be gentle with others in response to God being gentle with us. In his letter to the Galatians Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit as not only love, joy and peace, but also *gentleness* (5:23).

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”

When I was in seminary a homiletics professor once remarked that the role of a good preacher is to “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.” I dutifully wrote it down in my notebook. Very catchy, and on the surface it sounded exactly right, and there was a time when I tried to do just that when I preached: “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.”

But I have learned both in my life and in ministry that, while it is catchy, it is also completely wrong. The reason it is wrong is quite simple: no one is truly comfortable, at least no one I have ever met. Everyone I have ever gotten to know below the surface is anything but comfortable. Everyone I have ever gotten to know below the surface feels afflicted in one way or another, either from bullies without, or from the bully within, who of course is often the cruelest bully of all.

That’s why Jesus was gentle and handled people with care; that’s why Jesus was moved compassion when he saw the crowds who were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd; that’s why Jesus said, “Learn from me, for I am *gentle*.”

You see, the good news of the gospel is that Jesus was bullied on your behalf, that Jesus was afflicted on your behalf.

On Palm Sunday Jesus did not enter Jerusalem as an imposing bully on an even more imposing steed, but rather “*gentle* and riding on a donkey” (Matthew 21:25, citing Zechariah 9:9), and as

he rode into Jerusalem that day he was fully aware that there were many bullies waiting at the bus stop. We know from his anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane that his stomach was in knots.

Jesus was bullied on your behalf. He was bullied by the religious leaders who falsely accused him of blasphemy. He was bullied by the crowd who chanted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" He was bullied by the Roman soldiers who pounded a crown of thorns into his head and nailed him to a cross.

And yet even then Jesus was still gentle. "Father, forgive them," he said, "They do not know what they are doing."

Even as he hung helplessly on the cross Jesus was still bullied as those who passed by mocked him, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross!" Even one of the criminals between whom he was crucified bullied him, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

The bullying never stopped for Jesus, until his last breath, when he gently said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," and died. Gentle Jesus was bullied on your behalf, and there was nothing gentle about his death.

Jesus died for every instance in which you have been bullied or bullied others or bullied yourself. He has gently folded it all up and put into his pocket.

Jesus was even gentle after his resurrection, after which he went to the room where the disciples were hiding, the same disciples who ran away in his darkest hour, and gently said, "Peace be with you." He continued to handle the disciples with care.

And it is the same with us. Jesus is gentle and handles us with care. He is the Good Shepherd whom the Bible tells us *gently* leads us (Isaiah 40:11). This is the case right this moment, and it will always be the case.

When I was a senior in high school my favorite class was English Literature, and I remember being particularly moved by a famous poem, *Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*, by the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The reality is that all of us—the wise, the good, the wild, the grave, our fathers, all of us—on a day and hour known only to God will go into that good night, gently or otherwise. And in this life we are often not treated with gentleness. Bullying abounds. That’s the bad news.

The good news is that although in this life bullying abounds, Jesus’ gentleness abounds even more, and he gives us grace in those places where we are bullied.

The good news is that we don’t have to rage against the dying of the light because Jesus, the Light of the World, has already endured the full fury of that rage in our place.

The good news is that when we arrive at our final bus stop we will not be greeted by bullies, but by the risen Jesus, who will gently wipe every tear from our eyes and welcome us home, where we will experience eternal rest for our souls.

That’s the kind of gentleness that we all need. Amen.