

Gentleness | Galatians 5:23 & Matthew 11:25-30 | 1 & 4 March 2018

Gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness, meekness are attributes ascribed to Jesus, God the Father and the Holy Spirit. Reflect and receive this truth. They are also marks of His children, you and me. Gifts given to us to use and cultivate. I am struck by the social nature of these words. It seems they possess a power to defuse turmoil. When I am in a situation of brooding conflict it a flip the switch and act/speak in a gentle way, conflict often flees. These words remind me of watching young children at play. Oh that child-like faith! What a blessing! Be blessed by the notes.

Goddon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, (Hendrickson, 1994).

Gentleness. In earlier versions this word (**praytes**) was translated "meekness." For Paul it derives its Christian meaning from its relationship with Christ. In the Jesus tradition as recorded in Matt 11:25-30, this is one of the two words used to describe the character of Christ, which he, as the only Son of the Father, revealed about the character of the Father to the "infants" as over against the wise and understanding. That Paul knew this tradition, or one like it, seems certain from his appeal to the "meekness and gentleness of Christ" in 2 Cor 10:1. 451

As a Christian grace, reflecting the character of Christ himself, it occurs eight times in Paul (1 Cor 4:21; Gal 5:23; 6:1; Col 3:12; Eph 4:2; 1 Tm 6:11; 2 Tim 2:25; Tit 3:2). This is the one fruit, more than the others, for which one has difficulty in finding an adequate English word. [Footnote 290. In an uncharacteristic fashion, and precisely for this reason, BAGD {*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*} offers a broad range of meaning: "*gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness, meekness* in the older favorable sense."]. Whatever else, it carries the sense of humility (i.e. a proper estimation of oneself over against God) and considerateness toward others. Thus it is to this fruit that Paul will appeal in 6:1, when he urges those who walk by the Spirit to restore a brother or sister overtaken in a fault. One needs to do so in the "S/spirit of gentleness" both because the life of the other person is at stake and because one thereby remembers one's own frailties and susceptibility to temptation. In this list it stands as the exact antonym of the "work of the flesh" called **eritheia** ("selfish ambition"). It is this fruit of the Spirit which is at work in those who do not think too highly of themselves (6:3), but who "in humility consider others better than themselves" (Phil 2:3)—in the sense that they look after others' needs and concerns before their own.

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Old Testament: The fact that the LXX can translate the Hebrew **anow** (21 times in the OT) and **'ani** (65 times in the OT) and by **penes** and **ptochos** and **tapeinos** shows that the Hebrew terms had a much wider connotation which is not satisfied by any of the LXX [Greek] renderings. The poor were those in Israel who were without landed property. They were wrongfully restricted, disinherited, and deprived of the fullness which God willed. Hence they were often the victims of unscrupulous exploitation (Isa 32:7; Ps 37:14; Job 24:4). In a general sense **'ani** denotes the defenseless, those without rights, the oppressed, those who are cheated, exploited and cursed (cf. Ps 9 and 10). 257

Yahweh, however, takes the part of the **'ani** (Exod 22:21-24; Deut 24:14 f.), as do the prophets (Isa 3:14 f.; Amos 2:7; 8:4; Zech 7:10) and the wisdom literature (Prov 14:21; 22:22; 31:9, 20). Since Yahweh is the God of those without rights (Ps 25:9; 149:4; 34:2, 3), he hears and comforts those who find no mercy among their fellowmen (Isa 29:19; Job 36:15) and will finally reverse all that is not now in their favour (Isa 26:6; Ps 37:11; 147:6). Hence **'ani** and particularly **'anaw** change their meaning from those who are materially poor, and become the self-chosen religious title of those who in deep need and difficulty humbly seek help from Yahweh alone, or have found it there (Ps 40:17, 18)... In the messianic passages of the OT God's king is depicted as the helper of all who have been deprived of their rights and of all the needy (Pss 45:4, 5; 72; Isa 11:4; 61:1). The term **'ani** is never applied to God, but in Zech 9:9 (cf. Num 12:3) it is a title of honour given to the messiah. 257

New Testament: The words are found in the NT in Paul, James, 1 Peter, Acts and Matthew. Clear OT influence is found only in Matthew. For the rest, Hellenistic concepts are dominant. How far NT thought is based on the LXX and its OT background is not clear. Attention may be drawn to two points.

(1) praytes is a mark of Christ's rule. In contrast to the representatives of a political messianism Jesus repudiated the use of force to bring about the rule of God. His activity on earth is that of the OT king who brings salvation without using force of war (Matt 11:29; 21:5 = Zech 9:9)... In 2 Cor 10:1 Paul mentions **praytes** as a characteristic of Jesus' attitude to men during his life on earth, and holds them out as an example to the church. 258

(2) The words now express an attitude demanded of the Christian, though they are applied also to non-Christians... They state the rule for the way in which Christians and non-Christians should live together (Phil 4:5; Tit 3:2). They also apply in dealing with Christians who have committed sins (1 Cor 4:21; Gal 6:1; 2 Tim 2:25), and in the midst of enmity and persecution (1 Pet 3:16). Christians should set an example of this (Jas 3:13), especially bishops/pastors (1 Tim 3:3). 258

When the NT advocates **praytes**, it does not imply an attitude dependent solely on the human will. It is a sign of salvation: of "calling" (Eph 4:2), election (Col 3:12), and the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23). It is not a virtue in the Hellenistic sense, but a possibility of life and action given by God. It is not an aspect of human temperament. It comes about when men are linked with Christ and are conformed to his image. 259

Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Eerdmans, 1989).

Human life is both personal and corporate. No human life can be rightly understood apart from the whole story of which each life-story is a part. The trinitarian faith brings together these two aspects of human existence, assuring us that the one who is the source and sustainer and goal of all reality, and the one who is made known in the deepest experiences of the human spirit, is one with the man, this particular man, who went his humble way from Bethlehem to Calvary. There is thus no dichotomy between the inward experiences of the heart and the outward history of which each of us is a part. *God's self-revelation in Jesus is not simply an event which recedes farther and farther into the past; through the work of the Spirit we are led into an ever fuller understanding of it as the Spirit takes of the things for Jesus and shows them to us through the experiences of our place and time* (emphasis added). And, by the same token, our spiritual experience is not an affair of our own individual subjectivity; it is

sustained, nourished, and tested by continual reference to the original witnesses of the revelation and by reference to the continuing experience of those who share with us the allegiance to Jesus. 164

A true relation to God cannot be independent of our relation with other people, and allegiance to Christ must necessarily be expressed in relationship with those who share that allegiance. 165

Philip Turner, *Christian Ethics and the Church: Ecclesial Foundations for Moral Thought and Practice*, (Baker Academic, 2015).

One may fairly say by way of summary that the character of the common life of the church is the vehicle for its witness to the world of God's will for the world. Thus Yoder [John Howard Yoder] makes this bold statement about the relation between ethics and mission. 55

The novelty that God brings into the world is a community of those who serve instead of ruling, who suffer instead of inflicting suffering, whose fellowship crosses social lines instead of reinforcing them. This new Christian community in which the walls are broken down not by human idealism or democratic legalism but by the work of Christ is not only a vehicle of the gospel, or only a fruit of the gospel; it is the good news. 55

The goal of witness to a new possibility for human life is to be found within the perfection of Christ. The basis of this possibility is the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, who manifests this new possibility in his life of suffering obedience. The character of Christian ethics is to be found in the form of the church's common life wherein relations are shaped by the imitation of Christ. This imitation is encompassed by love—love that requires a desire for reconciliation, willingness to forgive, willingness to suffer... relations based on mutual subjection, and truthful speech. 55-56

[Turner, reviewing Yoder's work, describes how the church functions within this understanding.]

A communal context of discernment. In this process, the various gifts present in the community will come to the fore, each making its own unique contribution to the formation of a common mind and practice. The people having these gifts will become agents of communal unity and peace in various ways. There are those who will appear as "**agents of direction.**" Agents of direction act as prophets who interpret the situation of the community before God... There are also those who aid the community as "**agents of memory.**" Agents of memory are compared to scribes who interpret Holy Scripture and carry the memory of past acts of faithfulness and failure... Finally, there are "**agents of order and due process.**" These people act as "elders" who act to ensure that the deliberations of the community in fact compose an "open process" wherein each member of the community is allowed to contribute to common resolution of the issues confronting its members. 54