

## **“The Virtue of Gentleness”**

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1 Corinthians 4:14-21

### **CHILDREN’S TIME**

I recently went to see the movie Christopher Robin with Phyllis and Qwynn. Did you see it? I thought it was a great movie. The name of the movie is “Christopher Robin” but we know that one of the main characters is Winnie-the-Pooh. Have you read any Winnie-the-Pooh stories?

Teddy bears like Winnie-the-Pooh are very soft and cuddly and simply wonderful to have around.

Let’s list some of the things we know about Winnie-the-Pooh. What are some of the things you know and love about him?

1. He is a bear that belongs to a boy named Christopher Robin.
2. He has a bunch of friends, like: Piglet, Eeyore, Tigger, Rabbit, Roo, Kanga, Owl.
3. He lives in a place called The Hundred Acre Wood.
4. He says he is a “Bear of Very Little Brain”
5. He loves honey!

What are some of the things that Winnie-the Pooh says:

1. When he describes his tail he says, “It’s not much of a tail, but I’m sort of attached to it.”
2. He reminds us to be patient. “If the person you are talking to doesn’t appear to be listening be patient. It may simply be that he has a small piece of fluff in his ear.”
3. He makes us laugh when he says things like, “It is more fun to talk with someone who doesn’t use long, difficult words but rather short, easy words like ‘What about lunch?’”
4. He knows how to be a good friend and says, “I think we dream so we don’t have to be apart for so long. If we’re in each other’s dreams, we can be together all the time.”

There is something very lovable about Winnie-the-Pooh. Part of why we love him is that he’s funny, but also because he is so gentle. Being gentle is something that the Bible talks about too. It says that we are to be gentle with all people.

Who would think we could learn a wonderful Bible lesson like this from “A bear of very little brain?” Think about what our world would be like if everyone was gentle with one another like Winnie-the-Pooh. We would have a very different world. So, let’s follow Winnie-the-

Pooh's and Jesus' example and be gentle with ourselves and other people.

## **SERMON**

I'm going to read a passage from 1 Corinthians in a moment, but I wanted to give you some background. Paul was the author of this letter and he was writing to a group of believers in the cosmopolitan port city of Corinth in Greece.

In this cosmopolitan city there was a mixing pool of ideas. Often there were intellectual debates to determine superiority within society. Those who could wield the most eloquent argument and thereby demonstrate their wisdom were given status and often made lots of money.

In a similar way, the people of Corinth were aligning themselves with different disciples of Jesus who they understood to have more wisdom or the best argument. They then stood against those who followed other disciples. This was one of the issues about which Paul was writing to them.

The believers in Corinth were also fairly young in their faith and remained immature for some time. They needed guidance and

direction to move beyond where they were. They needed to grow up in their faith, and in the way that they related with one another. Their quarreling was needlessly dividing them and they were not united as one body in Christ.

Does that sound at all similar to our current world? According to a "List of Christian denominations by number of members" updated last week on August 21, 2018, there are nearly 500 major divisions within Christianity among the main groups of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. This does not include the numerous smaller divisions.

(reference: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Christian\\_denominations\\_by\\_number\\_of\\_members#References](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_denominations_by_number_of_members#References))

Paul wrote to tell the Corinthians that they did not need to be divided by following only one of the variety of missionaries that had preached to them.

### **READ 1 Cor 4:14-21 (The Message)**

*I'm not writing all this as a neighborhood scold just to make you feel rotten. I'm writing as a father to you, my children. I love you and want you to grow up well, not spoiled. There are a lot of*

*people around who can't wait to tell you what you've done wrong, but there aren't many fathers willing to take the time and effort to help you grow up. It was as Jesus helped me proclaim God's Message to you that I became your father. I'm not, you know, asking you to do anything I'm not already doing myself.*

*This is why I sent Timothy to you earlier. He is also my dear son, and true to the Master. He will refresh your memory on the instructions I regularly give all the churches on the way of Christ.*

*I know there are some among you who are so full of themselves they never listen to anyone, let alone me. They don't think I'll ever show up in person. But I'll be there sooner than you think, God willing, and then we'll see if they're full of anything but hot air. God's Way is not a matter of mere talk; it's an empowered life.*

*So how should I prepare to come to you? As a severe disciplinarian who makes you toe the mark? Or as a good friend and counselor who wants to share heart-to-heart with you? You decide.*

**Verse 21 from the NRSV**

*What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?*

You can hear in this passage that Paul was asserting he had authority with the Corinthians, like like a father would. His authority came, in part, from the fact that they came into the family of God through his preaching. He is also claiming authority from the fact that he is more mature in his faith.

However, Paul was unwilling to lord his position over them and wield a stick of discipline, although he could have. In fact others in that city did exactly that.

They needed to be guided, but his approach was instead through a spirit of gentleness — the gentleness demonstrated by Jesus, and that was born out of love, compassion and concern for their well being.

So, what is gentleness?

Gentleness isn't equated with weakness. Paul was certainly no push over, but he exhibited gentleness. Gentleness involves having power but refraining from using it, but instead acting with humility and self-restraint.

If you look up the opposite of gentleness, you will find anger, a desire for revenge, and puffing up the self.

Now certainly we all get angry. However, it was Aristotle who said that justified and properly focused anger is called gentleness.

Paul talked about power in this passage and he is demonstrating his power by expressing his authority and his concerns for their well being in a spirit of gentleness.

When a person lives with the virtue of gentleness they are not focused only on themselves, but direct the power they have to constructively build others up. You could say that they touch the world in such a way as to preserve and protect it.

This reminds me of one of Aesop's Fables that was well known in Ancient Greece and perhaps even by the Apostle Paul and the Corinthians.

As the story goes, the North Wind and the Sun had a long-standing dispute over which of them was more powerful. Each had their best arguments. The North Wind argued that it could tear up the tallest trees by the roots, level palaces, and raise the waves of the ocean to capsize even the largest vessels. "Nothing is more powerful than I," the North Wind proudly declared.

The Sun acknowledged that the North Wind was powerful, but

asserted that it was no match for its powerful rays which could open the buds of flowers, cause the grass to grow, and gave life to all plants and animals across the whole land.

As they were arguing, a traveling man happened to pass along with a cloak gathered around his shoulders. There was no shelter or vegetation for the traveler to take cover from the elements. So, the North Wind and the Sun both agreed that the first one to make the traveler part with his cloak would be deemed the stronger of the two.

The North Wind took the first turn as the Sun hid behind a cloud. The North Wind began a terrible gale that roared upon the road carrying the traveler. The man's cloak whipped around his body tearing it away from one arm. He quickly trapped his cloak and drew it in holding it tightly.

The North Wind doubled its efforts and even solicited the unfair help of his cousins the rain and hail, and the man had a rough go of it, scarcely being able to bear the gusts and pummeling of the elements. He fell to the ground and rolled along the path clutching ever more strongly to his cloak. The North Wind had failed epically.

The Sun, peeking out of the clouds, took its turn by bursting forth its rays, which caused the clouds to immediately dissipate. The flowers along the path seemed to smile and stretch open their peddles, while the animals in the fields returned to their pastures to munch on the delicious field grasses.

The traveler, who had been bound up in his cloak stood up and slightly loosened his tight grip and turned his face sunward and took a deep breath of the fresh air. Feeling more and more warm, he relaxed and slid off his cloak, laid it on the ground and sat upon it to cool himself off.

Thus ended their long-standing argument of who had the greater power. Where the North Wind had failed through force, the Sun had won through gentleness.

Paul didn't think about forcing the Corinthians to do anything. His words were written in a spirit of gentleness to encourage them modify their lifestyle and mature in their faith.

He said that when he first came to them he had to give them a very simple message, like spiritual baby food, and now their task was to mature so that they could eat spiritual solid food.

Throughout this letter, Paul repeatedly described the difference between the way they were currently living ("in the world," he called it) and the possible new way he encourages them to choose where they would be living "in God's Spirit."

As Paul said, it was about time that they grew up!

You can hear a father's voice in this words. He obviously loved them, and he expected more from them. Any of us here who are parents can probably relate.

You want to be stern, serious even, when one of your kids strays, so that they will listen and realign their priorities and actions. But there is a balance, because if you are too stern or forceful, the kids will rebel and go the opposite way.

Everything Paul was writing was done in the spirit of an ongoing relationship of love that he had developed with these people of Corinth. He wrote the things he did in order to build them up, not tear them down.

Paul was being gentle with the Corinthians because that was how the Spirit of God led him to relate, but he was also demonstrating this way of life as an example for them

to follow. He lived it so that they could see it and do likewise.

It is helpful to recognize that we are talking about first century Greece. Paul's life example would have been very unique. Nobody in Corinth likely had ever before witnessed someone giving of himself so generously and sacrificially while refusing to play the power and control games like others in authority such as teachers, local rulers, civic dignitaries or magistrates of the area.

Paul's example would have stood alone in the culture of Corinth, and Paul wanted them to take notice so that they also might live a different kind of life, in alignment with God's Spirit.

In this new life, compassion and love lead through an expression of gentleness.

In other places, Paul described gentleness as one of the fruit of the Spirit. These "fruit" are given by the Spirit of God to people as expressions of the Spirit's power in their lives. They transform not only the person's life internally, but they also transform how a person lives.

This makes expressions of gentleness virtuous, in that they are not being done only for the self,

but for the sake of the greater world.

What do you imagine the value might be to the Birmingham community when the people of this church are committed to live with the virtue of gentleness.