When I was a kid, one of my favorite shows was Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. I had all the action figures, watched the cartoon whenever I could. All my other toys, and some of my sisters, became players in a battle royale between my ninja turtles and the ‘bad guys’

I never noticed it, but my parents always said that right after I watched that show, I would go a little crazy. I would go around the house trying to karate chop things, jumping off furniture, trying to actually be like a ninja turtle. But what was actually happening, is I was exposed to violence, even in something as innocent as a cartoon. I became more violent as a result.

There are so many things in our lives that are full of violence. Sports like football or hockey are violent, even if we see it as a violence that’s okay. Sports like Mixed Martial Arts cage matches are becoming more popular all the time, where opponents go into a closed off cage and fight until one of them either passes out or taps out.

Violence is everywhere you look on Television and movies. Think about some of the most popular TV shows out there: CSI, NCIS, Criminal Minds, Law & Order. They all center around violence. Very rarely do any of those shows have an episode that doesn’t begin with murder. As the viewer you have a front row seat not only to the investigation, but you watch as the crime happens.

When Beth and I are going to watch a movie we usually check out the Internet Movie Database first. It has listings of all the details of movies and TV shows. One of the most helpful features is the Parent’s Guide. It will tell you what is in the movie that you or your kids should not see. I’ve realized that when I check that out, the only thing I generally check is to make sure it doesn’t have sex or nudity in it. I make sure I avoid movies and TV shows with those things, but totally ignore the violence that is even more prevalent.

Experts estimate that the average TV viewer sees around 18,000 acts of violence on TV each year. In 2016 over 200,000 people in the US died as a direct result of an act of violence.[[1]](#footnote-1) It seems like every year, Chicago tops the previous year’s homicide count. There have been 524 people killed this year in Chicago. The incredible thing is that they are actually having a pretty good year. Last year at this time they had 114 more killed by this time of the year. It’s easy to pass that off as Chicago being Chicago, but statistically South Bend and Indianapolis are just behind Chicago in the murder rate by population.[[2]](#footnote-2)

That violence happens in our own homes across the country. 25% of women in the US suffers from domestic abuse[[3]](#footnote-3) and those are only the ones that get reported. The majority, whether out of fear of their abuser or some other reason, simply stay silent.

All of this violence that we see everywhere around us, in the news, in the media, in sports, even in our kids cartoons, only serves to desensitize us to the violence in our world. It makes us apathetic to someone in the real world being murdered, when we just watched the same thing happen on our favorite show the night before. All this violence flies in the face of the gentleness that Paul tells us is one of the Fruits of the Spirit in:

**Galatians 5:22–23 ESV — 22** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

How do we cultivate gentleness in a world that is full of so much violence? Well first we have to understand what Paul meant by gentleness. The word that Paul used here that we translate gentleness is the word πραύτηες (prautes) which can mean gentleness as in the lack of violence. But it also speaks of courtesy, consideration, meekness, or humility. It means not being impressed by your own sense of self-importance. Your pride and your ego take a backseat when you are practicing this kind of gentleness.

What Paul is talking about had its roots in economic and social realms. In that sense a person’s humility and lowliness were not only about their attitude, but their position in life that was clear for all to see. When the OT talks about gentleness it often refers to Lepers, the afflicted, the humble, the meek, or the lonely. Again, not only in attitude and posture, but also in social and economic position.

Over time this word came to describe those who had wealth but didn’t rely on it. They didn’t make their wealth and prosperity their priority. It’s exactly the kind of attitude Jesus was getting at when he talked to the rich young ruler in Luke 18. Jesus told him he could not follow after him unless he could let go of all his wealth and he couldn’t do it. It wasn’t about the ruler’s money, it was about his attitude toward it. It was about where his priorities lay.

Eventually this word also began to be used of those who had a meek and humble attitude toward God. Throughout the Old Testament people with that attitude of gentleness and humility toward God were promised that God would be their advocate.

**Psalm 10:17–18 ESV — 17** O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear **18** to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more.

**Psalm 37:11 ESV — 11** But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.

**Psalm 147:6 ESV — 6** The Lord lifts up the humble; he casts the wicked to the ground.

**Psalm 149:4 ESV — 4** For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation.

**Isaiah 29:19 ESV — 19** The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

The opposite of that meek, humble, and gentle attitude is arrogance, pride, or conceit. Those are the things that characterize people who try to secure their future by their own strength. They are looking out for themselves, trying to do things on their own, trying to build themselves up no matter what it costs others.

When we live like that, when we try to do everything on our own, we are denying our need for God in our lives. The Israelites were often called stubborn or ‘stiff-necked’ people in the OT. That term was not just about stubbornness. The idea of a ‘stiff-neck’ is a refusal to bow down to the authority of God.

**2 Chronicles 30:7–8 ESV — 7** Do not be like your fathers and your brothers, who were faithless to the Lord God of their fathers, so that he made them a desolation, as you see. **8** Do not now be stiff-necked as your fathers were…

They were a proud people who would not bow down to God. We see the same thing again in the New Testament when Stephen calls the Jewish leaders stiff necked as well in Acts 7.

They may have had all the appearance of Jews who were devout and trusted in the Lord, but that’s where they let the influence of God end. They had the appearances of devoutness on the outside, but they didn’t let the word of God and the Holy Spirit get into their hearts and minds. Stephen says they opposed the Holy Spirit, they quenched the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

That’s exactly the opposite of allowing the Holy Spirit to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in your life. If we are like the Israelites and become stubborn and stiff-necked the Holy Spirit can’t do his work in us. If we refuse to allow God to lead us in our lives, then we will not produce the fruit of the Spirit. We won’t have love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, and kindness. We might have the world’s version of those things in our lives; whatever we can muster by our own effort. But the world’s version is a cheap imitation of what God provides. God changes the heart. We can only change our behavior.

If we try to do things on our own apart from God we will end up as stubborn, stiff-necked, and prideful people. That happens when we put our faith and trust in our own abilities instead of submitting to God and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

We get our greatest example of what it means to be gentle from Jesus himself. One way to define meekness is the ability to restrain yourself from using power and coercion to obtain what you want. Jesus did that to a far greater extent than we can ever understand.

**Philippians 2:5–8 ESV — 5** Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6** who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Don’t make the mistake of equating humility, meekness, and gentleness with weakness. Weakness implies that we have no choice but to be gentle and meek. A person who is weak has no power, no ability to be aggressive even if they wanted to be. But someone who has the ability to be aggressive, someone who has power to dominate others but chooses not to use it to their advantage is truly gentle.

This always makes me think of the dog Beth and I got right before Addy was born. She’s a lab Rottweiler mix named Daisy. Right now she’s 115 lbs. That dog is powerful. She could really do some damage if she wanted to. But she is also incredibly gentle. The kids would climb all over her and she would just sit there and let them. We had to watch to make sure the kids didn’t hurt her, because she would never let us know, and she would never hurt them.

At the house we lived at before we moved to La Porte we had her tied up in the yard, and the neighbors had this little yippy dog that thought he was tougher than she was. She would lay there and mind her own business while this little thing would bark in her face and dance all around her just being annoying. She could have eaten the thing in a couple bites, but she sat there and took it for a while, then she got fed up. All she did was take one leg and pin the thing to the ground for a minute or so. Then she let him up, and he never did that again.

That little dog was not gentle. He was tiny and had no power, but he was trying to act as if he did. Daisy who really did have the strength, who could have easily hurt this other dog, restrained her power and was gentle.

That’s what Jesus did when he came to earth. In just a few weeks we celebrate when Jesus came to live among us as a meek and gentle human baby. He let go of the incredible power he had in being equal with God and he became our Immanuel. Jesus exhibited not pride or power or brute force, but self-sacrificing love. Instead of a political king who would throw off the Roman Empire and make Israel into a mighty earthly nation, the Messiah was born in a stable to a lowly peasant girl.

That is true gentleness. To have the kind of power Jesus did and willingly give that up to be humbled, to be mistreated, and to be killed for our sake. Jesus didn’t flaunt the power of God or his high position as the Son of God, but there is a strength in what Jesus Christ did unlike anything the world has ever known.

In Revelation 5, John looks around for the Lion of Judah who can open the scrolls. He’s expecting someone who is fierce, strong, and aggressive. Instead he sees the Lamb, Jesus Christ, who instead of using brute force, sacrifices his life.

In our world, the kingdoms we make for ourselves are led by the rich, powerful, proud, and aggressive. We are led by those who claw their way to the top. But in the kingdom of God, the opposite is true. Jesus tells us in God’s Kingdom:

**Matthew 20:16 ESV — 16** So the last will be first, and the first last.”

**Matthew 5:3–5 ESV — 3** “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven… **5** “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Notice what he says: the meek do not overtake the earth and they don’t conquer it. The meek inherit the earth. It is given to them. Following Jesus requires a different set of priorities than being a successful person in our world.

Our culture does not value gentleness. It’s not something that naturally grows in our lives. It is something our culture tends to eradicate in us in our youth. Gentleness is equated with weakness in our culture. Instead we are encouraged to be aggressive. We are encouraged to go after what we desire and try to climb our way to the top.

Our culture worships strength and power and it’s manifested through brute strength, violence, pride, and power. That’s how people often relate to others. You see it begin on the playground with kids who bully other children. They are learning from a young age to relate to other people through pride and power.

That kind of relationship doesn’t stop there. You see examples of people every day, whether in our own lives or on the news, where the only way it seems people know how to relate to other people is through power. They do it by exalting themselves, lording their power, their money, their social position, or high rank over others. All they really are is playground bullies who only know how to relate to other people in one way.

It’s also a very self-centered way to relate to others. When that is going on, the only thing that person is worried about is themselves. They are worried about what people think about them and whether or not others respect them. They want to make sure they are getting their due from other people.

You can’t have a real relationship that way. You can’t have a real relationship without thinking of the other person. Just like many of the other fruit of the Spirit, gentleness has to be focused on other people. Relating to people through pride or power doesn’t allow for that. Many times that leads to the violence we see in our culture today.

When a husband tries to relate to his wife through pride and power he ends up dominating the relationship instead of loving her. Instead of providing for her and protecting her as he should, he becomes a source of her danger. That ends in violence of some kind. Usually it means some kind of abuse, whether it’s verbal, emotional, or physical. Robert Lewis says men who behave like that are not men, they are boys trying to act like men.

We’ve all known people who try to relate to others by dominating them. By trying to show them they are more powerful, more eloquent, smarter, quicker. The sad thing is that people who do that don’t know what they are missing. They can’t have real relationships that way and they are lonely people because of it.

That lack of gentleness is also evident in our speech. James tells us one of the most dangerous weapons we possess is our tongues. When our conversations with each other are laced with sarcasm, coarse joking, and gossip it prevents a gentle spirit from showing through. Gentleness means treating and speaking to others with meekness, humility, and gentleness.

We are called to be followers of Jesus in the midst of a world that ignores him. Cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is not just about us and how we live. It’s also about showing the world around us what it looks like to follow Jesus. It’s letting the people in our lives see a piece of the character of God lived out in us. We need to cultivate gentleness in our lives because when people see us being gentle in the midst of a world that is violent and aggressive, they will begin to see the character of God.

1. Shift your focus.

One of the ways we can do that is to shift our focus. To reprioritize our lives. If we make God and his Kingdome our priority instead of the keeping up with the Joneses, it means we no longer have to try to claw our way to the top of the ladder anymore. We are freed of the things the world thinks are important: power, wealth, prestige, influence. It shifts our priorities back to what is important in the kingdom of God.

We need to shift our focus off of the temporary success and accomplishments of this world and back to the things that matter for all eternity. We need to shift our focus back to God and to the people that he cares so much for that he sent his son to die for them.

1. Re-sensitize yourself to the lack of gentleness in our world.

We also need to re-sensitize ourselves to the lack of gentleness, the violence, that is so prevalent in the world around us. Take a look at the things you let into your life on a daily basis. Maybe it’s TV shows, movies, video games, or music that are full of violence. Maybe it’s conversations with other people that are not gentle. Conversations that are harsh and degrading to others. Maybe it’s the way you joke. The way you poke fun at people. The way you use sarcasm.If there is any lack of gentleness in your daily life, it’s serving to desensitize you to the world around you. It makes you numb and dull to the violence going on all around you. If we are going to cultivate gentleness in our lives, we have to first become aware of the violence, the lack of gentleness, that is already in our lives and root it out.

1. Be committed to prayer.

Finally, we need to be committed to prayer. Prayer helps us with this issue of gentleness in two ways. First of all, prayer adjusts our posture, which we need to do to become gentle. In a society that is all about being on top, being the best, being aggressive, and getting ahead, it’s hard to have the kind of posture we need to be a part of the kingdom of heaven. It’s hard to have the kind of posture we need to be gentle. One of the Desert Fathers, who were ascetic monks who lived in the desert, said ‘Prayer is the seed of gentleness and the absence of anger’.

That makes sense because of the one we are speaking to when we pray. It’s easy to speak harshly to a person who has offended us, and sometimes even easier to speak harshly *about* that person to someone else. But when we step into the presence of God through prayer, it becomes very difficult to speak harshly about that person to God. The sarcasm and belittling comments are shown for what they are when we are speaking to the Creator of the one we are upset with.

Maybe that’s why Jesus said **Matthew 5:44–45 ESV — 44** But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven…

It’s not that praying for our enemies will suddenly make them loveable or make them come to our point of view. Praying for our enemies will make a transformation take place in our own hearts. Praying for other people softens our hearts towards them. It makes us much more likely to treat them with gentleness. As fellow human beings created in the image of God.

A second way that prayer helps us become more gentle is that prayer brings us into the presence of God. Prayer helps us remember who we are before God and how we should relate to him and other people in humility. When we get a sense of how unworthy each one of us is before God, it makes it really difficult to continue being harsh or aggressive with someone who is imperfect, just like we are imperfect.

We can compare ourselves to other people and come out feeling like we’re pretty good. But when we are in the presence of a perfect God we realize just how alike we all are. We need to regularly acknowledge how broken we are, how sinful we are, so we can keep it in perspective. Remembering our own sinfulness and faults can help us treat other people with gentleness. If we can remember the grace that has been extended to us, that we are sinners as well, then we are much more likely to respond to others with gentleness and grace as well.

Jesus was gentle with us. He handled our sins with grace and forgiveness and gentleness. If we are going to follow in his footsteps, to be his disciples, then we need to do the same with those around us. Cultivating gentleness in your life doesn’t mean you are weak. It means you are becoming more like the Savior we follow.

1. https://webappa.cdc.gov/cgi-bin/broker.exe [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.nwitimes.com/news/national/here-s-a-look-at-the-cities-including-in-indiana/collection\_542dfcaa-f2ff-53bf-8e0a-fd36fa10fc60.html#7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/nisvs/infographic.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)