

The Believer and the Holy Spirit

XV. - The Fruit of Meekness and Temperance

“The fruit of the Spirit is . . . meekness [openness], temperance [inner-control]” (Galatians 5:22,23).

One of the common problems of believers is a sense of guilt and unworthiness. And small wonder. Constant pressure from the pulpit is to improve, improve, improve. There is therefore no real peace, as long as one feels that one falls short of the expectations of Christ. This passage on the fruit of the Spirit seems far beyond the reach of the average believer. Therefore, the assumption is that they must not have the Holy Spirit, since they do not exhibit these virtues adequately. We have sought to show that when we go back to the roots of the words that are used here, we find qualities that are indeed true within the spirit of all who have Christ.

The two words of this article are a case in point. What believer ever feels that he is meek enough or temperate enough? Much difficulty comes from a mistranslation of the words.

Meekness (Humility, Openness)

As is the case of many Greek words it is quite difficult to find English equivalents. The English word inevitably conveys the idea of a servile attitude based on weakness. It is the word used in the classic passage about Jesus entering Jerusalem, quoted from Zechariah 9:9—*“Behold thy King cometh, meek and mounted upon an ass, and upon a colt, the foal of an ass”* (Matthew 21:5). Both the Hebrew and the Greek words convey the idea of a voluntary humility rather than a negative idea of a forced servitude. When Jesus got to Jerusalem He went quickly to the temple and drove the money changers out with a scourge of ropes. That is hardly the image of meekness as the English word generally conveys. Both the Greek and Hebrew words give the sense of the kind of servile nature that recognizes one’s obligation and performs it. Jesus entered Jerusalem as a king, and yet symbolically conveyed the idea that He was taking the place of a servant, and ultimately a sacrifice for the sins of the world. It was with a regal sense of obligation that He did not flinch at the cost to Himself. In Psalm 45 (one of the messianic psalms), the psalmist makes reference to Jesus’ ultimate humility in the midst of triumph—*“And in Thy majesty ride prosperously [on the clouds or wind] because of truth and meekness [humility] and righteousness; and Thy right hand shall teach thee terrible [awesome] things”* (45:4). Here is a foreshadowing of Christ coming in majesty and awesomeness; coming with righteousness and truth and yet with humility.

As a fruit of the Spirit, applied to the believers, the Holy Spirit brings a new awareness of our true position before God. We see ourselves for what we are and come thus to Christ, voluntarily putting ourselves in His care and recognizing our need of His salvation. By its very nature, the search for salvation is the tacit confession that we are helpless to save ourselves. This word has nothing to do with the human emotions of gentility and shyness. We do not walk with bowed heads and drooping shoulders in a mock self-abnegation. Nevertheless, we are aware daily of our utter dependence on Christ for the fulfillment of His purpose in us.

Temperance [Inner-Strength]

The Greek word *εγκρατεία* (*egkrateia*) literally means “to hold firmly.” It was used to identify “self-control” in the ancient classics. Discipline was one of the hallmarks of the Spartan society which was a rival of the Athenians. The Spartans had been something of a licentious group and nearly lost their kingdom because of their weakness. This caused them to undergo a complete reformation and they actually became the symbols of rigorous self-discipline. It goes without saying that self-discipline can be accomplished apart from the Holy Spirit. Countless societies through the ages of history have exercised self-control almost beyond human endurance. What is in view here in this word is not the self-control of the flesh, but the inner-strength of the spirit. The word began with the idea of holding fast or holding firmly. It was used in describing the mastery of a ship. Gradually it came to mean upholding oneself in control.

As a fruit of the Spirit, the word refers not to fleshly self-control, but rather to the control exercised by the Holy Spirit—for inner strength. If the control of the self is the criterion for the filling of the Spirit, there would be many failures among the believers. Paul admitted to working most diligently to keep his flesh, under control, and yet still felt that he did not always succeed. Self-control in the flesh is a good thing. It is important for a harmonious life on the Earth. However, the ultimate control of the believer must be in the hand of the Holy Spirit. He holds us fast, so that in all the swirls and eddies of human inadequacy, we still have the consolation of His presence with us. It is important to remember that if the Holy Spirit were not in us, we would not struggle with ourselves.

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