For Personal Reflection

?

1. On a scale of one to ten, how gentle am I?
2. How am I tempted to overreact to things and people in life?
3. How am I tempted to under react to things and people in life?
4. How gentle am I in the face of my own sins, faults and imperfections?
5. How gentle am I in the face of others' sins, faults and imperfections?
6. How important—or unimportant—is it for me to get "my way"?
7. In what areas of my life might I need to become more gentle?
8. Do I enjoy my life here on earth? How aware and engaged am I in each day, hour and moment of life?
9. Do I treat myself—and others—with respect and reverence?

Further Reading

Introduction to the Devout Life: St. Francis de Sales. Part V, Chapter 11; Part III, Chapters 8 and 9; Part III, Chapter 24.

Selected Letters. Elisabeth Stopp. Page 135; page 268.

Spiritual Conferences St. Francis de Sales. Conference XIII, pp. 240—242.

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Email us:

dss@oblates.org

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They Shall Possess The Earth

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

The Gentle

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five great discourses in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus begins this discourse with the well-known Beatitudes, one of which is: "Blessed are the gentle; they shall inherit the earth."

Scripture commentator William Barclay understood gentleness as maintaining a balance between being either always angry or always passive.

"How sweet is patience when compared with revenge; gentleness, compared with anger and vexation."

We might expand this notion to consider how we deal with, express and/or act on our passions. It is about *self-discipline*, relating to ourselves and others with the eyes of God. It is about avoiding the extremes of overreacting or under reacting to life and the people, demands and events in it. It is about responding to life in ways that fit or are appropriate to the particular circumstances and/or events in which we find ourselves.

Gentleness might also be described as *proportionality*. It is about dispensing our passion or power in ways proportionate to the matter at hand: no more, and no less. Put another way, we avoid two extremes: allowing my passions to master me, or denying my passions altogether.

For St. Francis de Sales, gentleness is about treating ourselves and one another with profound respect and reverence: in good times, in tough times, in all the times in between.

St. Francis has a great deal to say about this virtue. It is, in fact, one of the two great pillars of Salesian spirituality, drawn from the words of Jesus who described himself as "gentle, humble of heart." (Mt 11: 29)

"Do not be over eager; be careful to serve God with great gentleness, for this is the right way of setting about God's service. Do not want to do everything, but only something, and no doubt you will in fact do much...."

"How sweet is patience when compared with revenge; gentleness, compared with anger and vexation; humility, when compared with arrogance and ambition," wrote St. Francis de Sales. "Gentleness perfects us with respect to our neighbor. It stands out among all the virtues as the flower of charity." (Introduction to the Devout Life. Part V, Chapter 11; Part III, Chapter 8)

This gentleness, this respect, this reverence for ourselves and others is rooted in humility which, in turn, is rooted in our relationship with God. "Profound humility toward God should produce a gentleness toward our neighbors. This, in turn, should foster a kindliness of heart. We should accommodate ourselves to others, restraining our vigor to suit the pace of others. (Conferences XIII: pp. 240—242)

The acid test of our gentleness is how we respond—or react—when others injure us. "If we are proud, puffed up and enraged when we are stung and bitten by detractors and enemies, it is a sure sign that neither humility nor gentleness are genuine in us, but only apparent and artificial." (Introduction, Part III, Chapter 8)

Being gentle is about living with purpose and direction in ways that avoid both passivity and aggression, either with regard to ourselves or others. Francis wrote: "Do not be over eager; be careful to serve God with great gentleness, for this is the right way of setting about God's service. Do not want to do everything, but only something, and no doubt you will in fact do much." (Selected Letters, p. 135)

"Gentleness is rooted in humility, in our relationship with God..."

How does this enable us to inherit the earth? By being gentle, by being self-disciplined, by being self-possessed we are better able to respond to life rather than react to it. We can then truly take hold of life as it is now, and dream of how it might be, with God's grace, in the days to come.