

Empathetic Apologetics and New Covenant Identity Markers

In offering a simple, introductory overview of these topics, I am not going to emphasize any technical aspects of what are called **apologetics** in modern times, nor will I go into the varied wonderful subjects possibly involved.

I would like for us to briefly view Jesus' **gentle** approach as an underlying foundational requirement - and our honest responsibility to follow him.

Jesus had felt great compassion for those scattered Israelites who were like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:35-38), so he asked his disciples to pray for harvest workers. Those disciples then became the answer to their own prayer! After Jesus had thus commissioned the twelve disciples to participate in preaching the Kingdom gospel in Matthew, chapter 10, he later rebuked the Galilean towns for their general response of unbelief in chapter 11. Then he rejoiced, while making a fabulous invitation to those who would believe his message.

Read Matthew 11: 25-30. Jesus invites those bearing a heavy load to come to him.

Verse 29-30: "Pick up my yoke and put it on; take lessons from me! My heart is gentle, not arrogant. You'll find the rest you deeply need. My yoke is easy to wear; my load is easy to bear."

You might recall that (in contrast to Jesus' lessons – an easy yoke, relatively speaking), the Mosaic law, according to Peter (in Acts 15:10), was a "yoke" which "neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear."

In this same context of Jesus' early ministry, Matthew quotes from the first psalm (Isaiah 42:1-9) of Isaiah's four prophetic psalms about the "servant of YHWH."

Read Matthew 12: 15-21.

Note how the "servant of Yahweh" would not break the damaged reed or snuff out the smoldering wick. He would come into a worldwide victory in which the nations would hope in his name, but not by becoming a bully!

In the world of the first century (and ever since those times), many clamor loudly (in the streets) while fighting and arguing. In contrast, the Messiah restores the damaged reed instead of crushing it. He revives the smoldering wick instead of snuffing it out.

To clarify a bit, **gentleness** does not mean being passive or reluctant to speak up about pertinent concerns. It certainly does not entail making duplicitous compromises for doubtful

purposes. It is not the slippery cowardice of being perpetually “nice” - just to avoid uncomfortable conflicts.

For example, it was clearly appropriate for Paul to boldly rebuke Peter publicly in Antioch (in the context described in Galatians 2:11-14), in order that the progress of the one true gospel not be derailed in the early days - when Jesus’ message was being freshly extended to Gentiles. There is later evidence that Peter got the point (by writing 1st and 2nd Peter) and that he deeply appreciated Paul’s writings, referring to them as Scriptures (2nd Peter 3:14-16).

Nevertheless, despite such key, exceptional situations, Jesus himself did not ever jump on the bandwagons of those who constantly trampled bruised reeds, so to speak, by shouting out for or against the agenda of the Pharisees, Herod, or the Roman Empire. Jesus did not play politics, and he did not allow himself to get shoved into the mold of cultural *status quo* expectations.

He stayed faithful to his Father’s priorities, and he perfectly practiced the wisdom from above.

Read James 3:13-18.

Nowadays, when people refer to “apologetics”, they might enthusiastically have in mind the importance of developing **reasons, arguments, and evidence** - in order to **defend** the faith....

But why leave out the underlying factor of **gentleness**: having **empathy** on those who see our examples, hear our words, and can detect our tones of voice? The spiritual fruit of **gentleness** is a vibrant new covenant identity marker; it involves being quick to hear, **slow** to speak, and **slow** to get angry, since human anger does not produce God’s right agenda (James 1:19, 20).

“A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Proverbs 15:1)

Jesus’ earliest disciples had been instructed to **rejoice** and **be glad** (Matthew 5:10-12), even when slandered and mistreated for speaking Jesus’ gospel truth in love. This non-retaliatory attitude was clearly evident in Acts 5:41, when, after disciples were beaten, they left the council feeling elated for having been deemed worthy to suffer disgrace on behalf of “the name.” This mindset strongly precludes the fallacy of becoming defensive or hostile when being antagonized. In the context of 1st Peter, chapter 3, one can see how true disciples of Jesus were being severely persecuted for doing what is good.

Read 1st Pete 3: 8-17.

As we endeavor to be as “wise as serpents” when answering others, we must not forget to also be as “innocent as doves” – totally without guile.

Remember, even if we develop skills to make clever, tactful arguments to demonstrate how Biblical, Christian faith is powerfully **reasonable**, our listeners will not care what we know if they do not know that we care!

[As cliché as this sounds, it points simply to the essential fruit of gentle compassion which is required.] We must be authentic examples of being folks committed to pray for others, help them, forgive them, and answer their questions gently (and not sarcastically.)

The magnanimous Father God, whom we are to represent, wants all to be saved and come unto the knowledge of the truth. He is not slow in bringing about his promises, but is patient toward all, not desiring that anyone be destroyed, but that all arrive at becoming repentant.

Without going into great detail here, **baptism**, (simply being dunked in water), while pledging oneself to change (repent) with a good conscience - and then be loyal to practice Jesus' teachings - is a basic "new covenant identity marker." When one identifies himself / herself with Jesus death, burial, and resurrection through baptism (Romans 6:3, 4), one emerges onto a level playing before God – where previous distinctions hold no sway according to Galatians 3:27:

'You see, every one of you who has been baptized into the Messiah has put on the Messiah. There is no longer Jew nor Greek [ethnic distinctions]; there is no longer slave nor free [separations in social status]; there is no longer "male and female" [divisions due to gender]; you are all one in the Messiah Jesus!'

There are several valid approaches to highlighting what I here refer to as "new covenant identity markers", like carefully contrasting them with the old covenant markers (according to the Law of Moses): circumcision, food laws, Sabbath-keeping, observing other holy days, and animal sacrifices (observances which do **not** apply to the new covenant family in the Messiah.)

In this presentation we are simply going to highlight what might be regarded as some of the primary **virtues** to be proactively developed from the heart, as exhibited in the New Testament writings. One might want to study how **faith** (or faithfulness), **hope**, and **love** are used in combination several times, as realities to describe our lives **now** and, also, in the **Age to Come**: (1st Thessalonians, chapter 1 / 1st Corinthians, chapter 13 / Colossians 1: 3-8).

Lists, such as the Galatians 5: 22, 23 portrayal of the fruit of the spirit are so relevant: **love, joy, peace, patience** (a word which can be translated as "great-heartedness" or "magnanimity"), **kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control**.

Read 2nd Peter 1: 1-11.

Diligence and constant effort must be patiently wrought in building such fruitful **virtues** into one's character. The word "disciple" is used 269 times in the New Testament. The word "Christian" is only used 3 times, apparently as a nickname. We are to make devoted "disciples" of all nations (Matthew 28:19a), not mere happy-go-lucky, nominal "Christians" who might not even be close to being dedicated to obeying Jesus' teachings!

Nine new covenant character traits are highlighted in the Beatitudes, a starkly relevant list of Kingdom blessings: Matthew 5:3-12.

Certain ancient philosophers (like Aristotle) described the virtues relevant to living a life which “flourishes”, such as generosity and justice, which are certainly noble qualities. Nevertheless, the foundation of worldly philosophy is usually **pride** for individual and collective accomplishments. In contrast to this pagan context of virtue, early disciples of Jesus developed their character as rooted in **humility, meekness, gentleness, mercy, forgiveness**, and self-sacrificial **love**. When folks live for apparent success in the present age, their goals will be vague, skewed, and limited. On the other hand, the clear Kingdom focus of Jesus’ genuine disciples enables a true reflection of humanity recreated in God’s image!

Humble, loving service now (as empowered by holy spirit) with joyful gratitude towards our Creator prepares us for the future Kingdom functions of being “priests” and “kings” on the earth! (Revelation 1:4-6 / 5:9, 10 / 20:6)

Here are a few further examples of “new covenant identity markers” in letters to the Thessalonians:

(1) Sexual purity: 1st Thessalonians 4: 1-8.

Analogy: If one carefully prunes a wild rose bush to produce a few, beautiful roses; he / she is helping the designed growth potential, not stifling it. By the same token, if one uses self-control in sexual matters according to biblical thinking (from the heart), one is not being “repressive” at all - but rather allowing God’s designed beauty to flourish in the lives of marriages among disciples.

Disregarding God’s instructions about **holy** living in sexual matters - is making a mockery of the God who gives **holy** spirit to true disciples!

(2) Practical growth in living with God’s love toward others: 1st Thessalonians 4: 9-12.

(3) The **Parousia**: understood correctly and applied **now** (in the hopeful heart) as a basis for genuine, anticipatory motivation, in light of **future** events: 1st Thessalonians 4:13- 5:11. Also, 2nd Thessalonians, chapters 1 and 2.

Suggestions: Further Reading

Paul: A Biography by N.T. Wright

After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters by N.T. Wright

The Allure of Gentleness: Defending the Faith in the Manner of Jesus by Dallas Willard

The Veil Removed by Turning to Christ: Mosaic Law OR New Covenant by Raymond Faircloth

Disclaimer: any few Trinitarian ideas expressed in the first three books recommended above do not really detract from the many good points made in these studies.

Available upon request: *The Wayfarer's Tale* (A 51 page memoir and parable). How did the stark rejection of obedience to Jesus' teachings in the four gospels [in the name of "grace"] lead to antinomianism in The Way International? If interested, request this (free) at:
ldc84jpm@yahoo.com