

So, last week we were told to put on hearts of compassion, to root our belonging in the sufficiency of Jesus Christ, who is our life worth living, so that we would use our strength to better the state or condition of those who are weaker or who are suffering.

Now, it's one thing to admit that we lack compassion, but would we ever describe ourselves as *unkind*? But, virtuous sins, those sins which masquerade as virtues, are more deceptive than we think they are, and we can become comfortable with the fraudulent virtue, making excuses for the self-centeredness from which they derive. In fact, this deception can be so prevalent within us that we become quite uncomfortable around people who *are* truly kind. You see this in the vitriol towards those who would show kindness to someone who disagrees with them, like Ellen Degeneres watching a game with G.W. Bush. Such kindness towards someone who disagreed on something important to them made many people violently uncomfortable.

What I mean by this is that people who are truly kind feel fake to us. We question their motives and assume that they are up to something, that they have ulterior motives.

Why do we assume this? Because we know that we sometimes have ulterior motives for being kind. That's why. We attach some , so people who love without expectations feel incomprehensible to us. I don't think it is an overstatement to say that in film and literature we connect more with the broken than with the pure. We are more empathetic to the Joker than Patch Adams.

In his review of Stephen Spielberg's movie Lincoln, David Denby opined, "The emphasis on Lincoln's goodness, his forbearance, his attributes both human and semi-divine, his

“purified” character, which combined elements of the Old and New Testaments—well, how can you portray such a being as a political actor, a *President*, without falling into dreadful piety and sentiment, or sheer boringness? John Ford’s very fine “Young Mr. Lincoln,” from 1939, is about Lincoln’s youth; it offers an intimation of greatness—at the end, Lincoln walks “up the road a piece” to confront his future. But the mature Lincoln is almost unimaginable; he’s myth and shadow, a figure fogged by veneration, by love mixed with incomprehension.”

True goodness is so foreign to our hearts, that when portrayed in story it feels incomprehensible, artificial, forced, “mythical”, and fake. This admirable goodness comes across as overly-sentimental, out-of-touch, “made-for-TV” Hallmark kind of fiction.

In fact, our natural human experience leads us not only to cynically doubt that people who seem very kind are truly kind at all, but to despise them for it. We live our lives looking for strings, wondering at the inhumanity of those who are really kind, benevolent, sacrificially kind-hearted people. The reason that we do this is because true selflessness is uncommon to my own heart, and characters whose virtue reveal my inadequacies, I want to remove from my life. But, do not despair, believer. We can change. The love of God is changing us as we believe the gospel.

There is a reason that kindness follows compassion in Paul’s description of our new life. If compassion is the tender affection of the strong to better the condition of the weak, then kindness is that affection in practice; the other-focused, self-denying, generous work of grace which strives to see another person flourish, regardless of whether or not we are noticed for the work.

If we are to put on kindness as the resultant and appropriate relational attire for those who are united to Christ, then we ought to understand what it is not, what it is, and how we are to put it on in the light of our union with Christ.

First, what is kindness not? Like compassion, kindness has a perverted imitator, a deceptive evil twin that fools us into thinking that we are being kind, when, in fact, we are not. Such kindness does not make much of the Christ to whom we are united, but makes much of something else, primarily me.

But biblical kindness is not about me. The imposter that appears kind, but which hides its true intentions, is manipulation. It does nice things for others with the intention of serving myself, of gaining for myself, even of using the person to whom I am showing “kindness” to benefit me. Not all altruistic acts are truly kind. For example, in his letter to Corinthians Paul notes that it is possible to give all our possessions to the poor, sacrifice everything in the name of religious service, even give our bodies to be burned, but to do so in a way that is worthless. It sounds loving, it sounds kind, but apparently can be done with a motive of self-centeredness which makes it worthless.

C.S. Lewis put it this way in his seminal work, *The Four Loves*:

“If you do someone a kindness to show him, or others, or yourself, what a great chap you are, or to put them in your debt, and then you sit down and wait for gratitude, you will be in for disappointment....All natural affection is idolatrous and needs to be purified.”

You see, that is what manipulation is: it is using supposedly kind and loving acts for the purpose of gaining power over another to serve your desires. That’s the “put them

in your debt” to which Lewis refers. It is a false kindness that never deals with the selfishness of the heart. It is really all about me being appreciated, recognized, praised, and ultimately served by others to satisfy my own desires and needs. It is using people, not loving people, making them feel that they are wrong if they don’t serve me in the way which I demand. It is artificial and forced, and the key characteristic of this false kindness is that it hides its true motivation. Manipulation only works if people believe that you are genuine. Therefore, manipulative acts must hide the true motivation, self-service and self-centeredness, from the person to whom it is manipulating. People skilled at manipulation are very skilled at appearing kind and loving, and skilled at making others feel guilty for their own sins. There are expert liars and pretenders. They speak the parseltongue of the Serpent in the Garden, who hid his true motives from Eve in order to use her and consume her and destroy her. Such is the false kindness of manipulators.

Sometimes, however, false kindness is not about gaining power over others, but about giving power over to others. It is a form of co-dependency, the desire for other people to be happy with me, to gain their approval, to secure a place of belonging with them. So, we do ‘kind’ things in order to gain their approval, but you notice that it is still all about me. “Please like me because I am a nice person.” But such niceness is not about the other person, but ultimately about what I can gain from them. I have idolized this person, and my kindness is artificial, forced, disingenuous, and selfish in self-pity and fear and despair. We have forgotten our union with Christ and are attempting to gain belonging from another person via the means of our performances of so-called kindness. Biblical kindness is not about gaining people’s approval.

The third type of imitation are acts of kindness done to atone for feelings of guilt. Why do I give money to the man begging on the street or the kid fundraising at my door? Why do I donate to the Ronald McDonald House when the checker at the grocery store asks if I want to round up? It is really kindness, or is it guilt-avoidance by means of generosity?

Because biblical kindness is not niceness. What I mean by this is that niceness does what makes somebody happy with me. That it is niceness' motivation. But kindness does what truly makes the other person flourish in the manner and the goals of the way things are supposed to be. In relationship with God, with one another, with nature, and with oneself.

We are not commanded to put on the clothes of making people happy. We are commanded to put on the clothes of making people holy, of truly working to build them up, to meet their needs of real Life, which is always rooted in proper worship. Now, that means that we should be helping the poor, alleviating the suffering of those whom we are capable of helping. We seek to work in medicine and to make better shoes and to bring justice to the oppressed in the legal system. Why? Not so that they honor us, or are pleased with us, but because it is the way things are supposed to be. Are our acts of kindness intended to restore these persons to God and to others; to the way that they are supposed to be, or are they done out of a worry about making people comfortable with a lifestyle which sets them at odds with their Creator?

You see, *niceness really operates out of a deep fear and insecurity.* When I am a nice person, I will avoid doing things that will actually benefit others if it causes tension or discomfort or even anger from the person to whom I am seeking to bring comfort. If

my child comes to me with a sliver in his hand, I must make him more uncomfortable before he will find comfort. He may be mad at me in the process, and even for a time afterward, but the kind thing to do is to remove the sliver, cleanse the wound with painful ointment, and bind up the wound. But if my fear of exclusion, of being cast out by somebody whom I am idolizing, whom I feel that I must have, leads me to do what makes them feel good rather than what makes them holy, I have not loved them and I have not been kind to them.

This false kindness is what leads so many of us Christians to be deceived that we are being kind when we are actually being unkind. We are tempted to remake the story that God is telling in history into some kind of therapy for weak people, rather than redemption for antagonistic people. We tend to skip the gospel chapters of corruption, of original sin, of depraved and wicked hearts because it makes people unhappy with God and with us. It makes us absolutely dependent, and we hate that!

Now, we know that this principle that kindness sometimes works to benefit others in a way which first causes discomfort and even pain is appropriate in some circumstances. Drug interventions and confrontations to harmful and violent men, for example. Drug addiction needs to be confronted with severe mercy, and it is kind to so, but what is it that deceives us into believing that addiction to substances is a great threat than being an enemy of God when His wrath is coming? Is it not because we care too much about men's approval and too little about men's salvation? I know that it is for me. I am a selfish man who needs to be changed by the Spirit of God showing me the mercies of God for myself over and over again.

Because **we live in an age where love itself has been reimagined** to be that which makes people feel good about themselves, even if they are doing what harms them greatly and eternally, and this love has been transposed upon God Himself, with the result being that many so-called Christians proclaim a God who would never call our very nature into something which needs to be redeemed and changed has been left out of the gospel.

D.A. Carson mentions this in his book, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, when he writes:

“The result, of course, is that the love of the God in our culture has been purged of anything the culture finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized.”

But here’s the problem: God isn’t nice. He’s too kind to be nice. He is so much more loving than niceness pretends to be. He loves us greatly, providing food, warmth, family, life, the means of care and kindness in the way things ought to be, in many circumstances (sometimes he withholds these things, as we shall see, for a greater purpose). But he doesn’t owe us these kindnesses. It is also His kindness which exposes our needs, which calls them out as troublesome and devastating and opposed to flourishing and peace and holiness, and to him. There are the severe mercies of God, His patient pointers to the real problem of our running away from Him who created us for Himself to walk in the manner in which we are designed by Him to walk. The signs of our sickness so that we will receive the cure, the swelling of the infection of sin so that we will come to Him for cleansing.

Kindness responds to brokenness with healing medicine and relational investment, not with mere sentimentality and the half-truth that “everything will be OK in the end” so that we would be content living in slavery on a ship destined for the bottom of the sea. It is the kindness of God which leads us to repentance. It is the kindness of God which sent the Son to redeem us by becoming the object of unkindness and scorn and shame.

And God’s kindness is far superior to niceness because it gives without deceit and without hidden motivation. It fully discloses the truth of our sin and the severity of His holiness, and at the same time it bears up the severe cost of both our sin and His holiness so that you and I might flourish in the way that we are supposed to be, i.e. belonging with Him with everything right between us and God. That is why Jesus had to come and die and be raised and rule over all humanity. Restoration through kindness that exposed the problem and kindness which worked to cure the problem at his own expense.

So, I’ve talked about what kindness is not, and now begun to talk about what kindness is and does.

Kindness is doing what makes another person or people flourish, regardless of the benefit to me. Kindness has a progression to it. First, *it fertilizes the fields of peace*. In fact, kindness is almost always closely connected to peace and forgiveness, as it is here in Colossians. If compassion is of the heart, then kindness is its hands and feet and mouth. It is opposed to the slander and anger and wrath and gossip of the death clothes listed above. It seeks not to compare and compete, but to exalt and edify, always working so that others will see and receive the freedom and Life which Christ offers.

Unlike manipulation, *kindness tills transparency of motivations* in its relationships.

Jesus told his disciples in John 15:

No one has greater love than this – that one lays down his life for his friends. ¹⁴

You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I no longer call you slaves, because the slave does not understand what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because I have revealed to you everything I heard from my Father.

Kindness is honest and transparent about its agenda. It is safe to question and confront because it is not hiding selfishness. It does not become defensive when questioned, but answers gently and honestly. It is also worth noting that this doesn't mean that you expose all your weaknesses to just anyone. John was very clear that Jesus "didn't entrust himself to [people who spoke well of him], because he knew all people, and needed no one to testify about man, for he himself knew what was in man." (John 2:24-25) There are some people whom you should not entrust yourself to, whom Jesus tells us not to give our pearls, because their intentions are to tear you to pieces. It doesn't mean that you don't work for their good, but it does mean that you don't give them the precious things to destroy.

Kindness also works in the light of God's whole redemptive story. It fertilizes the fields of peace by working for the benefit of others and not myself. It tills that relational field with transparency of its intentions because it doesn't need to gain anything from the other as it has all that it needs in Christ Jesus. Kindness doesn't need to manipulate or even hide our agenda for people's growth. *It plants in the life of another the full expectation of the future flower of God's restoration of the way things are supposed to be.* It has the hope of glory set before it. Can you relate to another person in the light

of the eternal things? Can you see the promised future of your brother in the light of the Lord's miraculous promise of growth and beauty and maturity? Can you see your sister's certainty of flourishing glory, or do you only see the present nominal seed, so slowly changing as to look only seedy?

Are you useful towards that end? That is what kindness does. In fact, the word kindness derives from the word "useful." This is why kindness is always working for the way things are supposed to be. It is useful to that end, to holiness, to the rest of the weary soul, the straightening of the crooked knees, the admonition of the unruly and to show mercy to the doubting (1 Thess 5:14; Jude 1:22).

Kindness seeks to help people function in the way which God has designed them to function: like Jesus Christ, through the means of repentance and faith in Him. Peter told his readers,

"Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation--if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good." (1 Peter 2:3)

We grow up into salvation. Your brother grows up into this salvation. We work out our salvation in the awe and circumspect appropriate to eternity, and the means of this growth is the tasting of the goodness of the Lord. And the means of your brother's holiness and your sister's benefit is his and her tasting that the Lord is good. And guess what this word "good" means? That's right. It's the same word used in Colossians 3:12. "Kind."

How do we do that? How do we put on kindness? As if sending you out last week to be more compassionate wasn't enough, and you were hoping for some easier fare this

week, right? It's one thing to know what kindness is, but it's something else to grow in it, to become more kind, to live truly and fully for the sake of another person without any self-centeredness or self-protectiveness, fear, anxiety, or pride. How do we do this?

As we taste the kindness of the Lord, we grow up. As we experience its sweetness, its sanctifying sustenance, its fulfillment, its joy. And into what are we growing? We are growing into that hope of glory, Christlikeness, the fulfillment of all that we are supposed to be, into that which God has united us in Christ Jesus...our Life. Are you willing to enter into every encounter with every person in the light of this truth?

First, we remember our union with Christ. We fear others' approval because we doubt the sufficiency of our belonging and acceptance with God in Christ. We feel the need, the compulsion, and the obsession with others because we don't functionally believe that Christ is enough. The doctrine of our union with the Christ who is the very image of God and through whom all things were made destroys our need to belong to others and we are freed to love them for their own sake, not because of some unmet need in ourselves.

Because we are already chosen, holy, and beloved, we don't need to do nice things so that people will consider us special or important. We have all that we need by the grace of God, and Christ is our security of it, not our own ability to believe well, to love well, and to do well. He is our security, our anchor, and our champion. He has bound himself to us without regret and without remorse. In fact, He has given us His own Spirit who is working to create a glory in you that exemplifies the glory of Christ Jesus and the joy that He has with the Father in perfect harmony. Our glory lies ahead, so we can rest in its surety even as we see the need to be changed and to grow.

We continue forward with a bold humility. Bold because we know that we are deeply beloved by God, that we belong to Him, that we are right with Him, so our deepest fear and insecurity have no basis. And humble because we are only right with Him because Jesus Christ died for us. He had to die for us. Humble because we presently struggle and fail. We, too, are still seedy, lacking the beautiful strength and towering stature that has yet to be formed completely in us, with repentance from our failures and the constant dependence upon Jesus as our Savior and King as our glory.

Therefore, *we must look again and again to the One whose kindness towards us has been poured out in full measure through Jesus.* Look at what Paul wrote to Titus:

For we too were once foolish, disobedient, misled, enslaved to various passions and desires, spending our lives in evil and envy, hateful and hating one another.

⁴ But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, ⁵ he saved us not by works of righteousness that we have done but on the basis of his mercy, through the washing of the new birth and the renewing of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us in full measure through Jesus Christ our Savior. ⁷ And so, since we have been justified by his grace, we become heirs with the confident expectation of eternal life." (Titus 3:3-7 NET)

We see, in the very act of God's redemption, all that He has done for us: saved us according to His grace, washed us and renewed us by His Holy Spirit though we were foolish and disobedient and enslaved to and loving to hate. He made everything right between us and Him. He adopted us and gave the certainty of eternal life through Jesus Christ. And these acts, from a heart of compassion, are called: the *kindness of God*.

Do you now see kindness? God did not bless you like this because it benefitted Him! He did it because He is kind and because He loves you! His motives were not hidden and there are none which are ulterior in it. He says it! He writes it across the annals of history!

Do you now see love? Do you see him with arms opened to failures, to sinners, to seeds who lack beauty and wisdom and knowledge in fullness, whose strength and glory has not yet become apparent? Do you see him being kind to those whose understanding of him is still infantile, incomplete, who are still growing and gathering and understanding, but who feel that this knowledge is so far away? Do you see him with open arms to you? They were nailed open...for you...because He is kind. His works are useful for your future flourishing and your flourishing is His joy.

How do you grow in kindness towards others? You must seek the kindness of God through Jesus Christ for yourself! Look again to the One who is kind and see others as God has revealed them to be. Work for their holiness and flourishing and wholeness, not because you need them, but because you love them, and if they are appreciative, then be grateful, but also when they are not, because you know that you have everything that you really need for the life worth living...and his name is Jesus Christ, our hope of glory, and our life.