

7 ||| Kindness

Like endurance, kindness becomes a possibility only when some other option could be chosen. Just as endurance only becomes a possibility during adversity, kindness only becomes a possibility when someone could be other than kind. Being unkind is the rather obvious alternative to kindness. Kindness is also a quality that can only be manifest in relation to other people. Kindness cannot be shown solitarily.

Kindness as an Option

As I sit at my desk in my study preparing for a sermon or studying the Scriptures, kindness is not an active dimension of my spirit. When the telephone rings and interrupts me eight times in the course of an hour, however, I have the opportunity of showing kindness. "Are you busy?" they ask.

"I'm studying," I reply. Then they continue talking because studying does not constitute being busy to them. I could respond indignantly, "Toad! Don't bother me when I'm studying." I have that option. People can only be kind when they have the option to be something else.

This word *kindness* which Paul uses in Galatians to describe the fruit of the Spirit is often linked with the quality of patience. Kindness has a relationship to the quality of life marked by endurance, forbearance, and long-suffering. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says that charity is long-suffering and kind. These two qualities are essential ingredients of the other quality—charity. All of the qualities which describe the fruit of the Spirit have a mutual dependence and interrelatedness about them. They weave together like a fabric. Several other passages in the New Testament link kindness with the concept of endurance or long-suffering. Paul mentions the relationship again in 2 Corinthians

6:6 and Colossians 3:12.

Kindness has its greatest opportunity for expression in difficult situations. At those times, people have the greatest temptation to be unkind; therefore, they have the greatest opportunity to show kindness. When a well-meaning individual ruins plans and efforts we have labored over by simply sticking his or her nose where it does not belong, how do we handle it? When we are under great stress to complete a job or when pressures of work and life problems mount, how do we treat the people who, through no fault of their own, are around us? In a thousand difficult situations of life, we have the option of showing kindness.

Kindness—What God Is Like

Jesus said that kindness is what God is like. We show that we are legitimate children of the Most High when we act kindly because God is kind to even the ungrateful and the selfish. Kindness is the way God treats the human race. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish" (Luke 6:35). Kindness is the way God has always related to people. Kindness is an essential aspect of God's nature and forms the basis for people being kind. Paul repeats the theme: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). In considering the fruit of the Spirit, we need to recall that the fruit does not come from the human spirit but from the Holy Spirit. The qualities that distinguish the fruit of the Spirit are characteristics of God the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is what God is like.

Kindness to the Unworthy

Kindness is one of God's distinguishing characteristics, and Jesus told His disciples to be like God who is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Kindness and being kind are not based on someone's worthiness to receive kindness. God shows kindness because that is what He is like, not because people are so worthy that they elicit kindness from Him. On the contrary, God's kindness shows itself in spite of the way people are.

Kindness is like love in the sense that it should not be shown just to

people who deserve it. When people deserve kindness, they have earned the right to be treated in a particular way. In this case, nice treatment is a reward or compensation for an acceptable form of behavior. Nice treatment is exchanged as a matter of routine behavior between friends, family, and social equals.

More Than Doing Good

Kindness comes out when someone has the real possibility of being other than kind. Kindness involves more, however, than merely doing nice things. It is possible to do a nice thing or a good deed without being kind. The welfare system in the United States does good things but not necessarily in a kind way. Sometimes the welfare system does its work in a way that may destroy self-respect and personal dignity.

Any bureaucratic structure can succumb to this flaw of the welfare system, whether it be the Internal Revenue Service, the army, the school board, or the admissions office of a hospital. Any institution that becomes big enough faces the danger of losing interest in treating people kindly. Such structures become task oriented, not people oriented. Like these structures, people may also do good things without necessarily being kind. In the Bible, kindness has a necessary relationship to compassion as it does in Colossians where believers are exhorted to, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness" (Col. 3:12). Compassion, caring, and concern for people are dimensions of kindness.

Confrontation

Sometimes a sense of compassion can lead people to think that kindness means avoiding difficulty, controversy, or confrontation with unworthy people. The most kind thing to do in such situations, however, may be to confront the person. The greatest demonstration of concern for someone's welfare does not come in avoidance but in facing the difficulty squarely. Kindness and compassion serve as the arena in which the confrontation takes place.

Jesus serves as a model for this kind of confrontation. A rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus said, "You know the commandments."

"Yes, of course," the young man replied, "All these I have observed

from my youth.”

Then Mark makes the comment that Jesus *loved* him and said, “You lack one thing” (10:21). The confrontation came, based on the fact that Jesus loved the young man. He kindly told the young man to sell all that he had and give to the poor, and he would have riches in heaven. The young man went away sad because he had great riches. The confrontation came out of kindness, based on compassion.

Living the Kindness of God

Kindness is a difficult thing to do. But if kindness is a characteristic of God, and the Holy Spirit dwells within us, then kindness ought to be a characteristic of our lives. The Bible says to “put on” kindness (Col. 3:12). It is something that can be decided upon and done, just like putting on a coat. And like a coat, kindness is what people see on the outside. Kindness shows if it is present.

The *King James Version* of the Bible sometimes translates the word under discussion as “goodness.” The Greek language had two major words for goodness. One carries the idea of “being good.” The word under discussion, however, does not include the moral or ethical idea. Instead, it involves being useful or serviceable. It means “being good for something” or “doing good.” In relation to people it entails doing good or being kind to them.

The same idea lies behind the word God used to evaluate creation. When God surveyed all that He had made, He declared that it was good. He did not mean that it did not break the law. He did not mean that the sun neither lies nor cheats. He did not mean creation is ethical. He was saying that His creation did what it was created to do. It was being what it was created to be.

The same standard applies to people. God created people to do good to one another, that is called kindness. Just as God looked at creation and saw that it was good, He also looks at us. The prophet Micah said, “He hath showed thee, O man, what is good” (Mic. 6:8). God has an intention and purpose for what people should be and how they should act toward one another. God has something in mind for the human race, and that purpose is the measuring stick by which God evaluates us.

Too often it is easier to hurt someone’s feelings than to be kind. It may be easier to see someone’s faults than to see his or her needs. One

of the leading maxims of life inside the prisons is "kindness is weakness." When circumstances create the opportunity to be kind, they also create the option to do something else. They create the opportunity to exercise strength and power over someone else. When we have the option to be kind, our other option is to hurt.

Exercising power gives us a sense of self-fulfillment. Power feeds that maddening human thirst to be like God. How ironic that Jesus said we become like God in weakness rather than in strength. "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish" (Luke 6:35).

When I was young, my Sunday School class was full of nice boys from nice families. A little fellow came to our class for awhile. He looked a little gawky, and he was very poor. His parents did not come to church, but they lived in the neighborhood of the church on the "other side of the highway," down where everyone changed apartments regularly, and no one stayed too long. His clothes were not in style in those days, when a boy had to wear a Madras shirt and Wee-jun moccasins to face the world. We found that it was fun to make fun of that little boy. He had come to church on his own, wanting to know about Jesus, and we drove him away. I do not know what ever happened to that boy. We had the opportunity to be kind to someone who could never do anything for us. We chose to be cruel. People have a great capacity for cruelty.

Jesus said that those who want to be children of God should just be chips off the old block. God is kind. The fruit of the Spirit includes kindness, because "like Father, like son."