



## **“WISE UP...ABOUT KINDNESS!”**

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Scripture: Proverbs 14:21, 19:17, 31:26

*Blessed is the one who is kind to the needy. (Proverbs 14:21)*

*One who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done. (Proverbs 19:17)*

*She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. (Proverbs 31:26)*

Thomas Long, Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship at Princeton writes:

Consider the experience of a business executive on the verge of implementing a shrewd business plan. The scheme involved temporarily dropping prices below the level of profitability in order to starve a smaller competitor out of the market. Then, with the market to himself, prices and profits could rise. The fact that the competitor was a struggling family-owned business, not really a major factor in the market, but the sole livelihood of a family with three small children, was known to the executive. The plan was technically legal, he thought, and all competitors are fair game, since business, after all, is business.

But just as the arrangements were nearly in place, the executive was called back to his hometown for the funeral of a cousin. During the graveside service, as the man sat under the tent which stretched over the family plot, his eye fell on the gravestone of his grandmother, who had died when he was only a boy. Inscribed on her stone were words from the Book of Proverbs: “She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.”<sup>1</sup>

“The teaching of *kindness*...” Those words began to burn in his heart. He didn’t merely recall his grandmother; he was confronted by her memory and her life commitments. This executive simply returned to the city with no will to duty but to seek somehow to live “the teaching of kindness.”

Let’s start with a definition. Kindness: having a deep-seated disposition to be good or benevolent. Kindness: having a gentle, compassionate nature. The willingness to do good or be sympathetic toward others.

Some people may be a little cynical and calculating about what constitutes kindness. A. Bartlett Giamatti died far too early while he was still Commissioner of Baseball. Before that, Giamatti was President of Yale University, and while he was Yale's President he advised the President of Ohio State University about "kindness." Bart Giamatti said, "Always be kind to your 'A' and 'B' students. Someday one of them will return to your campus as a good professor. And *also* be kind to your 'C' students. Someday one of them will return and build you a ten-million dollar science laboratory!"

Other people take the teaching of kindness very seriously, as a quality central to our understanding of the faith. John Wesley exhorted us this way:

Do all the *good* you can.  
By all the means you can.  
In all the ways you can.  
In all the places you can.  
At all the times you can.  
To all the people you can.  
As long as ever you can.

It's the teaching of kindness: be kind everywhere and always – and to everyone.

Holy scripture is full of exhortations for us to very simply be kind. Our God is described as kind toward us. We are exhorted, in turn, to be kind toward those in our sphere of influence. So, it's a little strange that kindness is not a more highly extolled virtue. Sure, it doesn't have the romance and altruism of love. It doesn't have the noble aura of sacrifice. Kindness doesn't have the courage of hope, not the power of self-control. It doesn't have the difficulty of patience or the spiritual achievement of peace.

Yet, the truth is, kindness is extolled throughout the long history of our Judeo-Christian faith. King David lamented, "Is there no one left from the house of Saul to whom I may show the *kindness* of God?" Job declared "Those who withhold *kindness* from a friend forsake the fear of the Almighty." God lamented the faithlessness of God's people through Hosea, saying, "I led them with cords of human *kindness*, with bands of love!" And, of course, Micah gave this guidance: "God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love *kindness*, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Kindness is even cited by Paul as one of the fruits of the Spirit, evidence that God's Spirit is alive and well in you. He said, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, *kindness*, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." And in I Corinthians 13:4, Paul gave us those very familiar words: "Love is patient, love is *kind*..." And yet, of all of the growths of the Spirit, of all the attention this attribute receives in the scriptures, we pay very little attention to the simple virtue of kindness. Which is to overlook one of the spiritual qualities which is most within our reach. And it's to our detriment that we neglect it.

As I read the total Gospel story of Jesus, I sense his total ministry and concern. That's why as I look at Christ's great parable of judgment, the emphasis is less on the event of judgment and *more* on the quality of being kind. I hear Jesus saying that the judgment of humankind will be

whether or not we have been kind to one another in what we say and do. Our judgment deals with every moment of human life. Our loving-kindness to the “least of these” my brothers and sisters is the test. Here we are fulfilling God’s Love. I hear a lot about “New Age thought” lately, but the only “new age” this world really needs is for you and for me to better live the kingdom principles of our Lord. The only “new” age this world is really awaiting is that of God’s kingdom; the age in which Christ’s followers truly walk by faith, live by love, and are known by their kindness and mercy to the weak and powerless of our communities and our world.

We call ourselves into judgment daily. You know the great parable Jesus told of those things by which we shall be judged. What does he single out? He says the day will come when the King will say, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” The righteous, Christ says, will then answer, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

Yes, it’s simply the teaching of “kindness.” The deep-seated disposition to be good or benevolent to others; having a gentle, compassionate nature.

Many years ago, in the 1840s, a Missouri country congregation listened to a sermon by a young preacher who had walked twenty miles to deliver it. Tired and hungry, this youth faltered, floundered and failed. The people were disgusted; they did not know he had walked the weary miles. When the service was over nobody offered him food or shelter, but as he started down the long road with a breaking heart, the black janitor asked him to share his humble meal in a nearby shanty.

Years passed. The young exhorter became known as a preacher, and his churches increased in size, and eventually he was elected Bishop. And so, after a full generation, Bishop Enoch Mather Marvin, a man of world-wide reputation, once more stood in that very same location to dedicate a great country church. The whole community was assembled; it was a tremendous event in their lives. When the service was ended, many crowded about offering lavish hospitality, but the Bishop waved them all aside and, looking about him, found the old black janitor still there. And he said, “When I was here years ago I was none too good for you, and I am none too good for you today.” And he went again to that janitor’s home.

Is this how we will receive our Lord? He warns that he will say to those who were never moved by compassion: “Depart from me, you cursed, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.” Our judgment would seem to be by such simple acts of loving kindness. Not by grandiose acts, not by well-publicized stunts before the multitudes. Not with any reward in mind. Just the simple deep-seated disposition to be merciful, good, compassionate toward those who have no power to do for themselves.

William Hale White in the novel *Miriam's Schooling*, tells of Mrs. Joll. Mrs. Joll is unkempt, crude in manners sometimes, not very careful in her speech. But Mrs. Joll instantly came to the help of a stranger who was ill. The novelist says that "She had the one thing needful. She had *kindness*, the one thing which, if ever there is to be a Judgment Day, will put her on the right hand; when all sorts of scientific people, religious people, students of poetry, people with exquisite emotions, will go to the left and be damned everlastingly."

We may not take such a severe outlook, but William White is saying with Jesus that today is Judgment Day. Every day our thoughts, words, deeds are deciding the direction of the movement of our lives — our "sheephood" or a "goathood," to put it in parable terms. Studdert Kennedy, a British writer and preacher, said that he was caught, not so much by the thought that he might awaken tomorrow morning to confront Judgment Day, but he was arrested by the thought that Judgment Day is happening today. He felt that insofar as we strive to be kind and good, or fail to be the same, it is a Judgment Day.

Now, so far in our discussion, most of us feel somewhat comfortable that we might just be considered "righteous" by this standard. But it's my experience that in so many ways the best of us fall short. We fall into the trap of thinking, "I've done my share. I've done all that can be expected. Let some other people pick up the slack and show kindness and do good!"

It's so easy to do a couple of kind acts and then to think that we've done what's required of us. But when the love of God lives within us there is never an end to the goodness and love we make real. John put it plainly in one of his letters: "Beloved, let us love, for love is of God and those who love know God and have seen God. Those who do not love do not know God for God is love!" There is never an end to the love of God when it is alive within us. To practice "random acts of kindness," as I wrote in my *Steeple Notes* article, is an excellent practice. But to do just one *occasional* act of kindness, a mere one-time act of goodness, is self-delusion if we think we are being obedient to God.

There is a story – totally unsubstantiated, of course – of a man who appeared at the Pearly Gates and asked to be admitted. Saint Peter asked him his name and why he felt justified in pushing the Pearly Doorbell. The man said, "Well, about twenty years ago my wife's church was having a special collection for money and I gave a dollar." Saint Paul happened to be listening in on this conversation. He suggested that Peter look back into the records. And so the Great Book was opened. Peter searched. Sure enough. The notation was found. "Contributed \$1 to the church pew cushion fund." Peter shook his head, asking the man, "Don't you have anything else that can be listed in your credit?" The new arrival thought for a while and came up with another remembrance. "Yes, I gave a dollar to the United Way four years ago." Again, Peter went back into the record book and it was there: \$1 to the United Way. Peter and Paul were silent for quite a while. Peter asked Paul what he thought should be done. "Should we open the gate?" And Peter, that blunt Apostle, replied, "No. Why don't we give him back his two bucks and tell him to go...somewhere else?"

God doesn't want "tokenism" when it comes to loving kindness. God wants the entirety of our hearts. Kindness, sympathy, and love are not legal requirements which we somehow "rack up" on some heavenly scoreboard. They must characterize our life. Otherwise, we're likely to get our

two bucks back and be sent elsewhere. So how sad it is when a person reaches the point when he says “I’ve done enough. I’ve reached my limit! I’m no longer doing that sacrificial, loving thing. It’s time for someone else to carry the burden!” I’m not talking about those who are no longer able to carry on the work of the Church because of age or disability. I’m talking about those who have reached the end of their human love and kindness and are in a kind of compassion fatigue. It’s then we need to open ourselves in vulnerability before God and be filled with God’s Spirit – for there’s no end to God’s loving kindness.

And so I return to the words of David, when he lamented the death of Jonathan and Saul: “Is there no one left from the house of Saul to whom I can show the *kindness* of God?” It was too late: there was no one left from that great house. But for you and me there are countless people who are waiting to be shown the kindness of God. Is there someone to whom you are tempted to speak harshly – a spouse or child or colleague – and you wonder just what words you will use? Wise up! May the teaching of kindness be on your tongue.

Is there someone you are tempted to shun or turn aside because you just don’t think they fit in here, or because they are very different from what you’re used to? Well, wise up. Remember, blessed are you if you are kind to those in need.

Is there someone you intend to hurt in any way by your speech or actions? Please, wise up. For “Whoever pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honor.”

Have you grown weary in your well-doing and don’t know why you should have to go on showing mercy, compassion and kindness to those who need you? Wise up! Remember the words of the “King:” “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”

I have a simple charge for you in the week ahead. Find someone, find anyone, who needs to be shown “the kindness of God” and extend God’s gracious love and kindness to them. Can you do that, so that if someone asks you next Sunday if you did that, you can say yes? For we who have known God’s kindness are to show it to others. Do that! And may the teaching of kindness be always on your tongue.

May we pray? Gracious God, you have told us that as we sow, so shall we reap. You have instructed us that the measure by which we forgive shall be the measure by which we are forgiven. This day we ask that, by your Spirit, you would help us to sow kindness – not only that we might one day receive your kindness, but because we already have through Christ our Lord. Place the leaven of kindness in our hearts, that we might be worthy of what we have received. Amen.

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1. Proverbs 31:26