

August 9, 2020
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Ephesians 4:29-32 Stop Being Nice; Be Kind
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Ephesians 4:29-32 New Revised Standard Version

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

There was a man that I used to visit. He was physically unable to go to church, so I would go to him. Once when I arrived, he had a noose that he had made up for me as a joke. He wasn't a particularly nice man, and I would make allowances for him because he didn't have much human contact at all. I would tell myself that he has just forgotten how to be around people, how to be nice. When I would visit him he would give me a check for the church and he would tell me that I would only get the check if I came to visit him in person. He said that he wouldn't mail the check to the church. He hadn't learned about generosity, about how generosity isn't something that God wants from us, but something that God wants for us. When I would go to visit him, I would have to get in the right frame of mind because I didn't like him, but I knew that I needed to be nice. I had to be nice to him, but I didn't want to be. I put on a fake smile, but I would have much rather been doing anything else. On the outside I was being "nice," but on the inside I wasn't happy or graceful.

We've all felt that way. It might be at work, or at school, or even at church. We just have to "be nice." Social etiquette and culture has told us that we have to be nice. We have to figure out the politically correct way to express ourselves. We all struggle with this, and yet I believe God is calling us to be more than nice.

People in the Bible weren't always treating each other well either. The Apostle Paul gives a new vision of what new life looks like. To be Christ-like, we must get beyond being nice. When we look at the Bible, God wasn't always nice. God wasn't nice to King David when David sinned, when David used his power and position to sleep with another man's wife and then David sent that man to the front lines of battle so that he would be killed. God wasn't nice to the Israelites wandering in the desert. They wandered for forty years. That is a long time! Jesus wasn't nice to the woman at the well, he called her out telling her that she has had five husband and the one that she has now is not her husband.

The Apostle Paul writes the words that we heard earlier to people who weren't getting along well. Paul reminds us that we must put aside our human reactions of bitterness, anger, shouting, all kinds of evil. Kindness is a reflection of God's action. Kindness helps build other people up. When Jesus talked with the woman at the well, he told her about living water. Being nice is a human reaction and it comes across on the surface, but kindness is a reflection of God's action and it comes out of the depths of our hearts.

God is calling us to put aside our human reactions. Christ didn't call us to be nice people, Christ called us to be like him. To be kind, our actions and words must build others up. Proverbs 16:24 reminds us that kind words are like honey. They are sweet to the spirit and bring healing to the body.

We also have to be kind to ourselves before we can express kindness to one another. How can you build yourself up? How can you rest and make time for joy in your life? We were out of town last week and had to board our dog. The vet called me in a panic and said that our dog had gained 10 pounds. Since March. I joked about the covid19, but the vet told me that 10 pounds on

our dog was 18% of her body weight. Our dog is 10 years old, so they said it could be old age, or her thyroid, or her owners feeding her too much. It is true that we have been feeding her more, but she asks for more food! Turns out her thyroid is fine and she isn't that old, so, now operation help the dog lose weight has begun. Now, when she paws at me for more food, I say no. I told myself that anytime she asked for more food, I would take her on a walk. One day, we went on four walks! I have realized that operation help the dog lose weight is good for me too. These walks give me time to breathe and to listen and it is good.

On day five of operation "help the dog lose weight," I realized that the dog didn't wake me up begging for food in the morning. It was a realization for me that we don't have to give in to our first impulse. If I want to be rude to someone, I don't have to give in to that impulse. I can choose kindness instead. In our next interaction with someone else, I want you to think about if you are imitating Christ and being kind. This August we'll continue to talk about how we can move beyond being nice toward kindness, joy, peace, and love. So, our task this week is to be kind. I want to challenge you to commit this week to do something kind for your neighbors. Do something kind for your co-workers. Do something kind for a family member. Do something kind for a friend.

Our world tells us that we should focus on pleasure and greed, but Christ tells us to focus on service and sacrifice. Our culture promotes achievement, success, and climbing to the top. God tells us if we want to be first, we need to go to the end of the line.

A few weeks ago I saw an exchange on social media where emotions were running high. Then, the most extraordinary thing happened. One of the people wrote, "I'm sorry. I apologize for my cold response. It was not out of a place of love." Can you believe it? Someone actually apologized on social media!

A preschool teacher tells the story of a four year old who was sent to apologize to a child he had hit on the playground. Several minutes later, the child hit again. When the teacher called him over, the boy explained, "That's okay. I'll apologize to him later." It took the teacher quite a while to persuade him that hitting another child was never okay. That was not the point of apologizing.

We must constantly turn away from sinful behavior. We get a list from Paul about what Christian speech is not. No anger, no quarreling, no bitterness, no ruining the reputation of another, no lying, no deceit. Christian speech is truthful, helpful, positive, builds up, is kind, and has words of forgiveness.

We should have a higher standard of how to interact with people verbally than many of us practice. Like so many things, it begins with listening. After you greet someone, could you try not making any statement until you have asked at least three questions and heard the answers?

In Marcus Borg's final book, *Convictions*, he talks about how centering ourselves in God transforms us. It changes us. We have these characteristics in our life when we center ourselves in God. Borg says the most important of these characteristics are compassion, freedom and courage, and gratitude. It is about loving what God loves and participating in God's passion for a different sort of world. It is about living a life of justice and mercy woven into the fabric of the world. It is fruit that feeds others.¹

Kindness is compassion and neighbor-directed love. Kindness is freedom and courage and the power to resist anxiety and fear. Kindness is gratitude awakening our senses to gift and wonder. May we all center ourselves in God this week and grow in compassion, freedom and

¹ Diana Butler Bass talks about this in her latest email newsletter. I can't find this newsletter online, but if you subscribe you can see it here: <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com>

courage, and gratitude as we are kind to everyone we see and to ourselves. God is calling us to be more than nice. We are asked to be kind to each other. Amen.