

THE POWER OF FELLOWSHIP

Part 3 - Redeeming Kindness

EPHESIANS 4.25-32 (ESV)



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CENTRAL

In studying this passage, I found a comment that articulated a vague thought I had been having: “Kindness is a virtue not often enough considered, but it remains central to what Christianity is all about ... kindness is one of the purest forms of the imitation of God” Kindness is central to

Christian living and it is often neglected. Why is that the case? Do we agree that kindness is in fact central to Christianity? Our answer to that question may drive our lack of consideration of this virtue.

In order to consider these questions regarding “kindness” we turn to this section of Ephesians 4 that contains 11 different commands relating to kindness. Two thoughts are necessary here. First of all, we must be careful to hear passages like this appropriately as instruction in godly living for us. We may need to spend time seeking clarity of understanding, but Scripture calls for a response from us, and often that response is specific action. Second, though we always look at Scripture in sections, instruction in godly living doesn’t begin with commands. The problems of humanity are not always that we don’t know the right thing to do or even that we often do the wrong thing. Our greatest problem is our rejection of the gracious rule of our Creator. We cannot be our own solution. The pursuit of Christian living begins with God Himself,

EPHESIANS 4.25-32

²⁵Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

IS IT WORTH IT?

Is kindness worth it? I don’t ask this out of cynicism, but I ask it having experienced firsthand acts of kindness by many of you toward my family or others within this church. I have learned much about kindness over the last 6 ½ years directly from many of you. I have learned of the power of kind words. I have seen by example after example, kind actions towards many seeming strangers. I don’t ask it “is it worth it?” out of cynicism, as if I see half-hearted attempts to pretend kindness for the sake of appeasement or manipulation. I ask it, because I know that often kindness takes its toll on us, and often we wonder what the return is for anyone involved.

There’s an obscure Greek myth, about a man named Sisyphus, who was the king of the city of Corinth. Sisyphus was crafty, passionate, and proud. For his bold lack of respect of the gods, his attempt to cheat Death, and his impudence to run from his own fate, he was eventually sentenced to a life of futile labor. His torment in the underworld consisted in rolling a large boulder up a steep hill. As he neared the top, the boulder would roll back down the hill, so he would descend after it and begin his work again. In the 1940s, philosopher Albert Camus saw this imprisonment of frustration as indicative of the futility of human existence in a world that he interpreted as void of any meaning whatsoever. In fact, Camus wrote of Sisyphus as a modern-day hero, who embraced meaninglessness and found life in the task itself. Our experience of this life may make such a perspective difficult to grasp.

I ask “is kindness worth it?” because I know that our experience of being kind to others may often feel like little more than rolling a rock up a hill, watching roll back down the same path, and descending to go and get it to start again. Seeing little to nothing result from our efforts to be kind to our spouse, co-workers, children, parents, friends, and strangers, we wonder is it worth it. Paul, in Ephesians 4, acknowledges these realities are not mythical. He describes striving after eternity, hope, and meaning apart from God as a futile effort, not unlike wandering around in the darkness and in ignorance.^{Eph 4.17-19} If there is no meaning, if there is nothing greater than seeing results, when those results don’t happen for us, we can become hardened, callous.^{Eph 4.19}

THE KINDNESS OF GOD

The Bible does not resign us to the life of futility, nor does it call us to find meaning in a meaningless task. The starting place for all of life, and in particular for kindness is God Himself. The clue that this was Paul’s perspective comes at the end of the verses we here considering. There Paul makes a direct connection between our kindness and God’s forgiveness of us. Interestingly, Paul goes on in the very next verse to speak of our kindness as an imitation of God.^{Eph 5.1} The display of the Christian virtue of kindness is a reflection of God’s kindness. To understand kindness, we must see the kindness of God.

Moses, the writer of the first five books of the Bible, led God’s people out of Egypt and knew the limitations of his ability to lead this people after they deserted the LORD and worshipped a golden calf.^{Ex 32} Moses prayed to God: “show me now your ways, that I may know you . . . show me your glory.”^{Ex 33.13, 18} God’s

answer was to reveal Himself by proclaiming His name for Moses to hear. The beginning of God's proclamation was: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."^{Ex 34.6} The phrase "steadfast love" is sometimes translated "loving-kindness" {ASV, NASB}. The rest of the words in this description fit: "merciful . . . gracious . . . slow to anger . . . faithfulness." In fact, this passage is cited throughout the Old Testament to speak of God and His stance toward His people.^{cf. Nu 14.18; 2 Chr 30.9; Neh 9.17; Ps 86.15, 103.8, 111.4, 112.4, 116.5, 145.8, Joel 2.13}

This is not to say that God's judgment is not real nor vital to a proper understanding of who God is.^{cf. Ex 34.7; Rom 11.22} It remains, however, that if "kindness" is not central to our understanding of the God of the Bible, we need to re-examine who it is that we worship.

This is vital to our understanding of the command: "Be kind to one another." Remember, Paul connects this call to kindness to God's forgiveness of us. For the Christian, this speaks to our motivation. We are called to live out the kindness of God by forgiving as a reflection of His forgiveness. It's often how we are motivated by our parents to share our toys—because others share with us. But this goes far beyond "do what's right." Paul reminds us that this is part of the experience of God's people: they have experienced the forgiveness of God. We are recipients of God's kindness. We show kindness not simply because someone else has done it too; we show kindness because we have experienced ultimate kindness.

THE WIDE-ANGLE LENS

With the foundation of the experience of God's kindness to us, what do these verses say about our showing kindness? Verse 32 stands as a summary of these eight verses. But the passage itself covers a variety of issues and situations as Paul gives direct counsel to this church. From the wide-angle perspective, three principles emerge that guide us in kindness.

First of all, kindness is a call to action. While kindness displays a disposition towards others, it does not stop there. We are called to speak truth,²⁵ deal with our anger,²⁶⁻²⁷ work honestly to serve those in need,²⁸ and to build others up with our words.²⁹ We need to be careful not to over-analyze the guidance given here. There must be a response.

The second principle that appears is that kindness works toward redemption. We are called to speak truth as members of one another; speaking truth builds trust and therefore builds community.²⁵ The thief doesn't stop at giving up his destructive profession; he is to seek opportunities to "share with anyone in need."²⁸ Beyond avoiding destructive talk we are called to look for opportunities to build others up, to speak grace into the lives of the people around us.²⁹ This is redemptive work, intended to bring healing into a world that lives with wounds.

The third principle that shows up is that these commands, while lived out among one another, are primarily God-ward in orientation. Paul challenges us "do not grieve the Holy Spirit." Our audience is God Himself. This never assumes we will do this perfectly, nor is there a presumption of immediate success. We must be careful not to let fear of failure, awkwardness, or even offense keep us from living with kindness.

THE ZOOM LENS

Looking more closely at kindness directly, verses 31 and 32 reveal much. The nouns of verse 31 stand in direct opposition to kindness. Reading this list as a whole, two patterns emerge

here: selfishness and destruction. The Bible acknowledges the place for righteous anger,^{Mk 3.5, 10.14; Rom 1.18} and yet in context, sinful human anger and noise, alongside bitterness and malice, speak of frustration toward others for their lack of willingness to serve us and respond to our wishes. The goal of these tendencies is the destruction (or at least harm) of any who stand in the way. Kindness to one another is the opposite of our self-absorption and willingness to destroy those in our path.

Positively, verse 32 rounds out the picture of Biblical kindness. It is "tenderhearted" or compassionate. It is aware of the needs and wounds of others, and seeks to bring healing where it can, even if the specific needs or wounds are unknown. At the same time it is "forgiving." Our stance towards one another must include a willingness to name our sins, to ask for forgiveness when we wrong one another, and to forgive one another. Kindness stands against the natural tendency to hold grudges and to attempt to keep one another in bondage to the wrongs we have committed—when reconciliation is pursued.

REDEEMING KINDNESS

Christianity is not a neutral position. It is not the back-drop against which the beauty of life is to be lived. Christianity is the beauty we are called to pursue in this life, central to which is kindness. Kindness transcends being nice; it's not really about having good manners. Kindness is our pursuit of redemption in the lives of others. To understand kindness as avoiding being mean, is no different than reaching into the refrigerator on a hot summer day expecting a cold drink of lemonade, and getting only lukewarm water. In the words of Paul elsewhere: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."^{Rom 12.21}

So what does kindness include for us? Let's consider this using Paul's grid from verses 25-29:

- **Our Words:** We are called to "speak the truth." We don't need to hold back when things are going well. And we need to be honest with one another when they're not going well. We belong to each other, so we must not pretend that our attempts at self-preservation will actually succeed. We must learn to share ourselves and to give others the grace to share of themselves.
- **Our Actions:** Kindness includes working hard so that others might benefit. This is counter-cultural. What do you have to share? A dinner table? An afternoon? A lunch-break? How can we order our lives in such a way that we have opportunities to invest in the lives of others?
- **Our Words:** Kindness also includes speaking to strengthen others. A starting place is to ask questions of people in your life. Take the time to listen. This doesn't have to be earth-shattering or heart-wrenching. Look for opportunities to speak words of commendation others. Be as specific as you can. This is giving grace.

Is it worth it? Is there meaning for us in what can easily feel futile? The meaning for us far exceeds the task. For the Christian, kindness flows from the true experience of the daily kindness of God, from whom everything derives meaning. The redeeming work of kindness is the call to engage with the people around us in order to pursue their good. John Stott, in writing on this passage, said: "Holiness is not a mystical condition experienced in relation to God but in isolation from human beings. You cannot be good in a vacuum, but only in the real world of people." May we never neglect this call from God to people. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, as God in Christ forgave you."