

## Try a Little Kindness

Colossians 3:12-14

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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A friend of mine was telling me about something that happened to him a couple of weeks ago. He was in the parking lot at the mall, looking for a parking place, when he saw a car begin to pull out. So he waited for the car to leave, and then he parked in the vacated space. Only when he pulled into the space, he saw that there was another car coming from the opposite direction who had intended to park in that space. He hadn't seen the other car because he was blocked by the one that was leaving. The driver of the other car gave my friend an angry look, and drove on to find another space. My friend quickly got out of his car and saw where the other person had parked. He went to her and said, "I'm so sorry about taking that parking space; I didn't see that you were waiting for it." The lady who was driving the other car snapped back, "You just don't know what kind of day I've been having." They both turned to walk away, and after a couple of steps the woman called back to my friend, "Thank you. I appreciate your kindness."

What makes that scene so remarkable is that the woman was surprised that my friend would show her a little kindness. Where has kindness gone? I think that one of the characteristics of the world in which we live these days is that there is a dearth of kindness. Kindness is a rather rare commodity. Of course, the woman in the parking lot was surprised. We don't really expect to see kindness out there in the world. Where has kindness gone?

One of my first memory verses from the Bible was, "Be ye kind, one to another." Paul lists kindness as one of the gifts of the spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and more. Kindness is clearly an important trait for those who would be followers of Jesus.

I haven't seen these stickers much recently, but a couple of years ago, you would see the phrase on bumper stickers or coffee mugs: "Practice Random Acts of Kindness." It is a neat thought. In a world where there is so much ugliness and where bad deeds abound, isn't it a nice idea to think that there are people out there who are popping up at random times and places bringing a little kindness? The idea is that from time to time, as the opportunity arises or as the mood strikes us, we do some good deed, some act of kindness for someone for no apparent reason—just for the joy of doing it. On your way home from work, you buy some flowers for your wife—for no reason except to let her know you love her. Or you decide to pick up some doughnuts to take to the office—some treats for your co-workers to let them know you appreciate them. Or you dash off a card to an old friend to let her know you've been thinking about her. Random acts of kindness—I like the idea.

But the more I think about it, I have to say that there is something that bothers me a little about this concept of practicing random acts of kindness. What bothers me is the randomness of it. I guess that if some occasional random act of kindness is the best you can do, then do it. But I think that what Jesus calls his followers to do is not some occasional, random nice deed. Jesus calls us to a life dedicated to systematic, intentional acts of kindness and love. The Christian life does not consist in an occasional, random, act of kindness, but in the intentional regular practice of kindness toward others. We are not called to be kind when the mood strikes us, but to be kind even when the mood doesn't strike us.

I remember hearing my grandmother say, “It’s never wrong to be kind to someone.” Kindness is never out of season; kindness is never out of place; kindness is always appropriate and right.

I get the idea from the bumper sticker that the world would be a much better place if people would go about doing these random nice things. But in fact what makes the world a better place is people dedicated to the hard work and sacrifice of showing compassion and love and kindness for people who need it.

It’s one thing to see the guy on the street corner holding a sign saying “Will work for food” and you go buy him a hamburger. That qualifies as a random act of kindness. But the greater need is to help the guy find a job so that he can buy his own hamburger. And that takes more than an occasional random act.

Here’s an example of what I’m getting at. Think for a minute about your mothers. What if our mothers had gone about the task of mothering by practicing random acts of kindness? She might have said, “I think that as a way of showing my child I love him, I will fix him some supper tonight.” Or she might have said, “One nice thing I could do for my child is to wash her blue jeans.” What if our mothers had gone about the task of mothering as if it was a matter of doing occasional, as-the-mood-strikes-you acts of kindness?

But mothering is not like that. It is not the occasional act of kindness, it is the regular, intentional, daily expressions of love for her child that makes a mother a mother. Cooking meals, washing clothes, cleaning toilets probably won’t give you that warm, bubbly, feel-good-all-over feeling, but it is the way we show in concrete actions every day our love for those in our family.

I’m certainly glad that my mother did not show her love for me in random, occasional acts. She did those random, occasional acts to emphasize her love, but those were simply icing on the cake. The real way she proved her love for us children was through the day in and day out work of mothering—making us eat our peas, sitting up with us when we were sick, reading stories to us, teaching us to say “Yes, sir” and “No, ma’am.” That’s what true mothering requires.

So it is with followers of Jesus. Followers of Jesus are not called to occasional good deeds, but are called to a life dedicated to love for others, kindness toward others. Not random acts of kindness, but regular, intentional, purposeful acts of kindness.

Kindness—intentional, sacrificial acts of kindness—is central to our life as people of faith.

The prophet Micah in the Old Testament said, “What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” Several Old Testament proverbs—we heard them earlier—extol the importance of being kind to others, especially the needy. Paul said that one of the characteristics of love is that it is “patient and kind” (1 Corinthians 13:4).

So let’s talk about kindness for a minute. Out of curiosity, I googled “kindness” to see what might come up. And I was surprised at what I found. Of course, there are lots of songs with “kindness” in the title. I came on a definition of “kindness” which said that kindness is “marked by charitable behavior, mild disposition, pleasantness, tenderness.” That sounds nice, but a little weak—a mild disposition, pleasantness? It sounds like kindness is some sort of passive niceness. I don’t think that’s what Paul was talking about in the scripture we read.

I kept looking and found a website called “Kindness, Inc.” Wow, a whole website devoted to kindness. Except that the kind deeds the website was about were things like how to clean your cooktop and where to find the home loan that’s right for you. Again, not exactly what I was hoping to find.

But there are other websites that amazed me: dedicated to teaching how we can spread kindness in our communities and in our world. The thing that these websites had in common was that they saw kindness as an active, participatory action. Not passive “niceness” or “pleasantness” but actions that take you to where there are people in need and reaching out to them.

I think that there are several qualities to genuine kindness. One quality is an awareness of and respect for the other person. My friend in the mall parking lot was aware of the fact that the other driver was upset, and so he reached out in kindness to her.

Another quality of kindness is humility. As long as I’m thinking primarily about myself, it’s going to be difficult for me to reach out with kindness to others. I need to be reminded that I myself have been the beneficiary of the kindnesses of others—not because I have been deserving or worthy of their kindness, but because that’s who they are. There is a humility and self-giving quality to kindness.

And then, I think that true kindness calls for sacrifice. We need to be willing to give of ourselves.

Several years ago, Barbara and I visited the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston. It is a wonderful record of that period in American history from WWII to Kennedy’s death in 1963. Those of us who lived through those days remember that it was a turbulent time—Cuban missile crisis, escalation of the Vietnam War, rising tensions over racial issues. And one of the things that struck me was how many times in his speeches President Kennedy called for the people to make sacrifices for the good of the nation. “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Unfortunately, I think we’ve lost something of that call to sacrifice. I think we now have turned it around. The criterion we use in electing a leader is what he or she can do for me.

A genuine act of kindness calls us to follow the example of Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve, not to be loved but to love.

So with all that in mind: here’s your memory verse for today. Repeat after me: “Be ye kind, one to another.” Amen. ✠