

## The Fruit of the Spirit: Kindness : Psalm 106:1-11, 2 Peter 1: 1-11

There are some things in life which are difficult to define but which you know when you see them. I'm a bit like that with clothes. On the occasions when I have to go clothes shopping I generally know what I'm after, but if you asked me to give you a detailed description of the item I couldn't do it; but I know it when I see it.

I think kindness is a bit like that. We know it when we see it and we certainly know it when we experience it; but it is rather difficult to define precisely. Even the Bible translators struggle with it. Our reading from 2 Peter 1 didn't even include the word kindness, although the sentiment is definitely there in the passage. The reason we had those verses read to us is because the previous NIV translation used the word kindness instead of mutual affection, which should teach me to always check the church Bibles before deciding on our readings!

Part of the problem in defining kindness is that it is so closely linked to goodness that it is difficult to separate the two from each other. In fact the book by Jerry Bridges called *The Fruitful Life* which has been a huge help in preparing for this series actually deals with kindness and goodness in the same chapter. But that closeness poses me a problem this morning because in this sermon series on the fruit of the Holy Spirit, we have decided to take each aspect of that fruit one after the other. So I not only have to come up with a helpful definition of kindness but I have to try not to preach Dan's sermon for next week this week.

So let me start by trying to separate and define kindness and goodness, at least in terms of how the Bible seems to use those words.

### **What is Biblical Kindness?**

When the Bible speaks about kindness it seems to refer to a positive and loving inner disposition towards others, whereas goodness is the result of that the inner disposition and shows itself in loving and generous words and actions. We might say that someone can be kind (to have a loving the inner disposition in the way they think about others and react towards them) and should do good (acting on those feelings in loving and generous ways).

Now of course it gets messy because it's possible to describe someone as good, although no one is ultimately good except God. But I think it's a helpful starting point because we can't 'do kind.' So as the Holy Spirit works in our lives as followers of Jesus perhaps it's helpful to remember that we should increasingly be kind and do good.

So where as next week we will be focusing on those acts of kindness we might call good deeds, today is all about the heart: it's about our inner disposition and reaction to others. James chapter 2 tells us that '*faith without works is dead.*' But works of faith, our good deeds, flow most readily from a kind heart, and the model for our kindness is of course the kindness of God. Kindness is part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit whose job it is to make us more like Jesus because kindness is also a mark of God's character.

So let's start there. Let's have a look at **God's kindness towards people.**

The first thing to see is that God's kindness is universal: Acts 14:17 "*Yet God has not left himself without testimony: he has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their season; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your heart with joy.*"

So often we take the kindness of God for granted. In days when people's health, wealth and well-being depended much more directly on their own efforts growing food, it was easier to remember and give thanks for God's universal kindness in providing sunshine and rain, growth and harvest. But now we can eat strawberries 12 months of the year and import food from all over the world it's very easy to forget that all we have comes from God.

But why should the wheat fields grow? Why should the sun rise tomorrow? Why should we have breath within our lungs and the ability to earn money to buy food and live comfortably? There is no reason except the kindness of God, and it is a kindness which is universal. God's kindness in this regard has no borders, it recognises no governments and does not distinguish between people of different races or genders or religions. God's kindness towards people is universal.

Secondly God's kindness is generous: whether it's in football transfers or international negotiations the sense of "quid pro quo" isn't far away is it? Deals need to be fair to both sides. And that's okay in business. But very often our hearts are drawn most of all to those people who might be able to repay us in some way further down the line. That's an uncomfortable thought, and one we might want to reject, but so often it's the case.

But in the scriptures God's kindness is most commonly seen towards those at the bottom of the pile who have nothing to offer in return. Time and time again the Scriptures express God's special care and regard for the poor and the needy; the widow and the orphan; the uneducated and the alien. By worldly standards these people have nothing to offer God or his kingdom, but God's kindness is generous and is never self seeking. And that's good news for us, whatever our place in society, because spiritually speaking and materially speaking none of us have nothing to offer God, because everything belongs to him in the first place. God's kindness is generous.

Thirdly, God's kindness is persistent: I don't know about you but sometimes I get rather fed up with requests to give money to good causes. The leaflets come through the door three or four times a week and whilst they are all worthy and the need is great, by and large those requests go in the recycling bin. Now like all of you, in fact like all people, I have limited resources so it's madness to think I can give to everyone who asks, but sometimes I don't even *feel* any kind of compassion or kindness towards those in need.

But God isn't like that. He is never too tired or too weary to be kind. His loving-kindness towards those he has made goes on and on and on and on. Think about Jesus on the mountain side having had a long hard day when more crowds of people come out to meet him. Did he run off and hide? No, he met their needs and healed their diseases and taught them the truth about God because he had what Pete Woodcock called a deep gut-wrenching compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. God doesn't suffer from compassion fatigue because his kindness is persistent.

Fourthly, God's kindness is resilient: even towards the ungrateful. Sometimes when my heart is stirred with compassion and kindness and that kindness over spills into loving action I can get rather hurt when those acts of kindness aren't appreciated. Have you felt like that too? Your heart goes out towards someone, you feel their pain and you are moved to action but they either don't notice, don't say thank you or they throw it back in your face. And what happens as a result? Very often we stop feeling kind towards them and instead feel aggrieved and upset, even angry.

But God's kindness is resilient. He is not easily put off. In fact, God's kindness towards people carries on even in the face of constant disobedience. Listen to these words from Isaiah chapter 11. *"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. <sup>2</sup> But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. <sup>3</sup> It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realise it was I who healed them. <sup>4</sup> I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them."*

Can you sense the kindness and love which God feels towards his perennially disobedient people? He rescued them; they disobeyed. He forgave them; they went astray again. He sought them out and found them; but they ran off once more. Time and time again God's heart goes out towards people with unquestionable kindness. Though we are undeserving and rebellious; though we are ungrateful and disobedient; though we are slow to learn and quick to disobey God never gives up. God's kindness is resilient.

Finally, God's kindness is costly: In Ephesians chapter 2 Paul describes the wonder of our salvation and how we, though we were once wicked sinners, have been forgiven, washed clean and brought into the family of a holy God in order (verse 7) *"that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."* God's kindness to us is costly because it is most perfectly expressed in Jesus and his death on the cross.

God's kindness is not just a positive attitude towards people. He doesn't just think happy thoughts about us or send gifts in the post like some distant but wealthy godparent. No, God's kindness to us led directly to Jesus leaving the glory of heaven, becoming a man and dying in our place on the cross. God's kindness is costly. Infinitely so.

To understand something of the father heart of God towards his people, to try and get our heads around God's infinite kindness is a hard task but a glorious endeavour.

It's hard because our hearts are not like his. We are so often unkind and ungrateful. We do often judge people by their looks or position or behaviour and treat them differently because of it. We do get bitter when our acts of kindness are not returned. We do get worn out and fed up, and we do grumble when our kindness starts getting too costly because inherently we are self-centred people.

But wouldn't it be wonderful if we weren't? Wouldn't it be wonderful if our first reaction towards others was kindness and compassion and love and mercy rather than "what's going to cost me?" Wouldn't it be wonderful if we, and all those around us, could grow in the kindness of God? What a difference that would make to our homes, our workplaces and our town!

You see good deeds aren't enough. We can give grudgingly and we can serve dutifully but since God loves a cheerful giver, since **how** we give is as important, if not more so, than **what** we give, then more than anything else we need our hearts changed and to grow in kindness.

So how do we do that? **How do we grow in kindness?**

Well as we've seen all along, kindness, like all the fruit is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit who grows these characteristics in us; we don't do it by ourselves. But that doesn't mean we don't have a role to play. We must be active participants in growing in holiness, not lazy bystanders.

When I'm hoping for a good crop from my vegetable beds, although ultimately it is the Lord who brings the growth there is an awful lot of weeding and fertilising and watering and pest control to do. So in our lives also, whilst it is the Holy Spirit who grows his fruit in us and so makes us more like Jesus, we need to be active with the spiritual weeding and the fertilising and the watering and the pest control if we are to be fruitful Christians.

Let me give you four quick tips as I close. And since today we are talking about the attitude of our hearts to others, these are all things which will change the way we think and then, God-willing, also reshape our hearts and our affections towards those around us.

1. Be humble and honest about yourself

One of the reasons we often struggle with kindness towards others is because we feel superior in some way. We think we have got where we are by our own talents or hard work or moral lives whilst they have chosen the wrong paths and caused their own problems. But that's pride. That's seeing the speck in their eye and ignoring the plank in our own. And when we feel like that we will either not feel moved to help them or any gifts will be done in a very condescending way.

But if we are able to be honest and open about our own flaws and failings; if we can admit our weaknesses and the depths of our own sin and admit that every good thing we do or have is nothing more than a gift of God's grace, then we will never look down on others because it is only by God's grace that we are not in that situation too. So to grow in kindness, be humble and honest about yourself. Following on from that...

## 2. Be grateful and full of praise to God

Knowing that everything we have comes from God shouldn't just make us feel good inside it should lead to grateful and heartfelt praise. Praising God is one of those things that re-centres our values and lift our eyes away from our own situation and focus again on our glorious saviour who gave himself for us.

And when we realise just how sinful we are and how great a saviour we have we will want to serve him and bless others that he brings into our lives. In the words of Romans 8 we will want to "*offer our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice*" because Jesus has given everything for us and he commands us to reach out in kindness so that others might also be brought into his family.

As we commented earlier, when kindness becomes costly we can often become resentful. So that's why thirdly we must...

## 3. Be future focussed

Imagine that you are travelling to John O'Groats to collect a huge inheritance from a distant uncle who had recently died. The trip is going well, but somewhere near Inverness the car breaks down. You take it into a garage and the mechanic tells you it's going to be several hundred pounds to fix the car. What do you do?

Do you break down in tears and weep? Do you jump up and down get angry at your loss? Of course not! Whatever costs you need to pay on the way you know that waiting for you at the end of the journey is a glorious inheritance which will dwarf any costs you might incur on the way.

In the same way we can often be so *now* focused that we forget about the joy and the eternal reward that waits for us in Heaven. But if we are future focused; if our ultimate joy and lasting treasure is not in the things of this world but in the hope of the next, then a life of obedience to Christ, a life of overflowing and lived out kindness, however costly, is not too high a price to pay.

Be humble and honest about yourself. Be grateful and full of praise to God. And be future focused. And here's a tip number four:

## 4. Repeat steps 1 to 3 continually!

I've never done it, I will never do it, but I'm told that the best training for running a marathon is controlling your diet, getting plenty of sleep and doing lots and lots of running. And if you want to do a marathon you need to do those things over and over and over again over a long period of time.

In the same way, there are some things in the Christian life that never change, things that we never grow out of and that we simply need to keep doing over and over and over again.

Do you want to grow in kindness? Then remind yourself daily that all people are made in God's image, that all people have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that even the most moral can only be saved by God's grace. When that truth sinks in rejoice in it always and let the wonder of God's mercy to you fill your soul and flood your heart with gratitude. And when the cost of obedience gets high and you feel like giving in look ahead to the glorious future God has graciously prepared for those who love him.

Growing in kindness isn't rocket science. It isn't complicated. It can sometimes be difficult, but by God's grace and the work of the Spirit, it is possible.