

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 20, 2022**

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT #5: KINDNESS
MORE THAN RANDOM ACTS
Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

“The fruit of the Spirit,” say it with me, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

As we continue our countdown of Paul’s Top Nine varieties of the Fruit of the Spirit, we come today to #5: The fruit of kindness. For some biblical perspective, please turn to Ephesians 4. We will start at 4:25 and continue through 5:2. I invite you to follow along as I read. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

* * * * *

Air travel during the era of COVID, with all its requirements and restrictions, has been ... let’s say, complicated. *More* complicated, at least. That is not to say that it was a picnic before COVID. It was not, especially if you were traveling with children.

Years ago, Gordon MacDonald and his wife Gail were on a plane flying home to Boston, where MacDonald was the pastor of a church. He describes their experience on that flight this way: “We were seated almost at the back of the (plane) in the two aisle seats across from each other.... A woman with two [small] children came down the aisle and took a seat right in front of us. And [trailing] behind her, another woman. The two women took the (aisle) and (window) seats. One of the children sat in the middle seat, while the second child was on the lap of one of the women. I figured these were two mothers traveling together with their kids, and I hoped they wouldn’t be noisy.

“(We took off), and my prayer wasn’t answered. The two children had a tough time. The air was turbulent, the children cried a lot – their ears hurt – and it was a miserable flight. I watched as these two women kept trying to help and comfort the children. The woman at the window played with the child in the middle seat, trying to make her feel good and paying lots of attention.

“I thought: ‘These women deserve a medal for what they’re doing.’ But things went downhill from there. As we (were approaching Boston), the child in the middle seat got sick. The next thing I knew she was losing everything from every part of her body.” [Not a pleasant thought, but you get the picture.] “The diaper wasn’t on tight, and before long a stench began to rise through the cabin. It was unbearable!

“I could see over the top of the seat that there was indescribable stuff all over everything. It was on the woman’s clothes. It was all over the seat. It was on the floor. It was one of the most repugnant things I had seen in a long time.

“I watched as the woman next to the window patiently comforted the child and tried her best to clean up the mess.

“The plane landed, and when we pulled up to the gate all of us were ready to exit the plane as fast as we could.

“The flight attendant came up with paper towels, handed them to the woman in the window seat, and said: ‘Here, Ma’am, these are for your little girl.’

“To which the woman replied: ‘This isn’t my little girl.’

“‘Aren’t you traveling together?’

“‘No, I’ve never met this woman and these children before in my life.’

“Suddenly,” says MacDonald, “I realized that this woman had just been kind. A lot of us would have just died in that situation.” Or lost our cool and created an even worse scene. “She had found this to be an opportunity to show kindness.”

Kindness, like goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control, the other varieties of the fruit of the Spirit we have considered so far, is not something that comes naturally to us. Kindness is the opposite of selfishness. And we are, at heart, in our unredeemed state, apart from God’s grace, selfish to the core.

One dictionary defines kindness as “the quality of being gentle, caring, and helpful” (colliersdictionary.com). Another defines it as “the quality of being gentle and considerate” (merriam-webster.com). Gentleness and kindness, both varieties of the fruit of the Spirit, are very similar. They are not identical twins, but they are members of the same family.

Kindness and goodness are closely related, too, kind of like the chicken and the egg. I’m not sure which one comes first. Does kindness, which can also be defined as “love in action,” flow from goodness? Does goodness produce acts of kindness? Or does the quality of kindness produce goodness expressed in good deeds? I’m not sure. Either way, you can’t really have one without the other.

In Amor Towles’ novel *The Lincoln Highway*, which is set in 1954, one of the characters, a teenage Nebraska farm girl named Sally, whose mother has passed away, offers her perspective on the meaning of kindness after hearing a sermon on the story of Martha and Mary from Luke 10:38-42. Sally explains why she makes preserves the way she does – “I make preserves in the manner that was taught to me by my mother, God rest her soul. She made preserves in the manner that was taught to her by her mother, and Grandma made preserves in the manner that was taught to her by hers. And so on, back through the ages all the way to Eve. Or, at least as far as Martha.” – After all that, she gets around to what kindness means to her:

“For what is kindness but the performance of an act that is both beneficial to another and unrequired? There is no kindness in paying a bill. There is no kindness in getting up at dawn to slop the pigs, or milk the cows, or gather eggs from the henhouse. For that matter, there is no kindness in making dinner, or in cleaning the kitchen after your father heads upstairs without so much as a word of thanks.

“There is no kindness in latching the doors and turning out the lights, or in picking up the clothes from the bathroom floor in order to put them in the hamper. There is no kindness in taking care of a household because your only sister had the good sense to get herself married and move to Pensacola.

“Nope, I said to myself while climbing into bed and switching off the light, there is no kindness in any of these things.

“For kindness begins where necessity ends.”

(Amor Towles, *The Lincoln Highway*, 103-104.)

You may quibble with Sally at one point or another. But her notion that kindness begins where necessity ends is worth thinking about. And her description (if not a formal definition) of kindness as “the performance of an act that is both beneficial to another and unrequired” is right on the mark.

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) – we talked about him last week – showed kindness to the man who had been beaten and robbed and left to die by the side of the road. We may say that he had a moral duty to help, but he did not have a legal duty. He was not required by law to come to the aid of the man in need.

Another example of kindness in action in the Bible is the story in Acts 9 of a woman named Tabitha (Dorcas, in Greek), who, it is said, “was always doing good and helping the poor.” She became sick and died, and after preparing her body for burial, they placed her in the upstairs room of a house, where widows gathered to mourn, showing everyone the robes and other clothing she had made for them when she was still alive. Her kindness had made a difference in their lives.

The story ends with Peter praying for her, and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, bringing her back to life and presenting her to all the believers there alive (Acts 9:36-43).

Tabitha was known for performing acts that were beneficial to others and unrequired. Which is what kindness is all about.

Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, you may recall, famously complained that her husband was “too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness” (*Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 5). In pursuit of her self-centered goals, there was no room for anything as inconvenient or counterproductive as showing kindness to people who were, in her opinion, just in the way. To her way of thinking,

people were to be used. When their usefulness had been used up, they were expendable. Time to get rid of them. Get them out of the way.

A person who is full of “the milk of human kindness” – like Jesus – would not see others as objects to be used, but as persons of great worth, as creatures of significance, whose needs are real, whose hurts are painful, whose hopes and dreams are not to be discounted or dismissed.

Macbeth’s “milk of human kindness” was too much for Lady Macbeth. It is too much for a lot of people today. In our divided world, where people are too often and too easily offended, lots of people have no time for kindness. Which is not only unfortunate, not only sad, it is totally unacceptable among the followers of Jesus. It is unbecoming of a biblically functioning community of grace where Jesus is Lord and every person counts. Kindness is intrinsic to who we are as adopted members of God’s family. All of this, I trust, is intuitively obvious.

Jesus points the way to a lifestyle of kindness for us in the Sermon on the Mount in giving us the Golden Rule to follow. The Golden Rule is not: “Do unto others before they do unto you.” You know that’s not it.

The Golden Rule is simply this: In everything you do, in every area of your life, *do to* (or for) *others what you would want them to do to* (or for) *you* (Matthew 7:12). Treat others the way you want others to treat you.

Do you want others to be kind, to show kindness, to you? Then treat them with kindness. It’s not complicated, is it?

The Golden Rule has been called “The Mount Everest of ethics” (Lee Strobel, *God’s Outrageous Claims*, 152). It is not based on self-interest or self-protection or self-promotion. It is based on selfless generosity.

God does not call you to perform “random acts of kindness” – as praiseworthy and valuable as those random acts may be. Actor Morgan Freeman (who can forget *Driving Miss Daisy* or *The Shawshank Redemption* or *The Bucket List*?) said that the way we change the world is by “one random act of kindness at a time.” There is a better way to make a difference for good in the world. Not by *random acts* of kindness, but by *intentional acts* of kindness, by a consistent *lifestyle* of kindness that can revolutionize the way people relate to one another.

The best places for that to happen – the best places for it to begin and grow – are right here in the church, in our relationships with one another, flawed, broken, and needy creatures that we are, and in our families, in the “little churches” that exist in our homes.

In our Scripture reading from Ephesians 4 and 5, Paul does what he frequently does. He tells us what to do and what not to do. He tells us what we must get rid of and what we must hold onto or cultivate in our lives: Lying, allowing anger to fester, giving the devil a beachhead in our lives, stealing, talking in a manner unbecoming a Christian, causing God grief, allowing bitterness, rage, anger, lawlessness, slander (blasphemy), and every form of malice, in thought

or action – all of these, Paul says, have got to go. There is no place for them in the life of any of God’s people. Not in your life. Not in mine.

Instead, says Paul, these are the things that are to characterize our lives: Speaking the truth (in love [Ephesians 4:15]), resolving our anger (not allowing it to fester), doing honest work, sharing with those in need, using words to bless and build up others (not to cause injury or tear down), living to honor God and keeping in step with the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:25), and then, he says: “Be kind” – show kindness – “and compassionate” – tenderhearted – “to one another, forgiving” – showing grace to – “each other, just as in Christ God forgave” – showed grace to – “you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children” – which is what you are, what *we* are! – “and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

The Message paraphrase of the first two verses of Ephesians 5 reads: “Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with Him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of Himself to us. Love like that” (Ephesians 5:1-2, *MSG*).

I take issue with *The Message* where it says: “Mostly what God does is love you.” It’s the word “mostly” that I disagree with. *Everything* God does, He does out of love. *Everything* God does is an expression of His unchanging love for sinners. For redeemed sinners. In *everything* God works for the good of those who love Him, whom He has called according to His saving purpose (Romans 8:28). It is all by love, which finds expression in His kindness in sending His Son to be our Savior.

God didn’t have to send Jesus to us. Jesus didn’t have to die for us. He didn’t have to do it. But, in His kindness and love, He chose to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. The radical kindness of God is seen, to borrow from Sally in *The Lincoln Highway*, in God’s performance of an act that was both beneficial to others [to *us*] and unrequired.

I would love to explore with you in greater depth what the Bible says about the kindness of God. I think I’ll do that next week, instead of moving on to #4 on Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit. I know you’re probably impatient and want to get the sermon on patience over with, but you will have to be patient and, God willing, we will get to the fruit of patience in two weeks. ☺

THREE WAYS TO SHOW KINDNESS

Before I close today, let me mention three ways you can exhibit the spiritual fruit of kindness in your life.

Words

The first way is with your words. You can show kindness in what you say and how you say it.

Richard Halverson, longtime Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda and then Chaplain of the US Senate for 15 years, once led the Senate in prayer with these words: “Lord, help them appreciate the power of words to edify or offend, to strengthen or weaken, to give hope or to frustrate, to purify or pollute, to build or destroy.”

Your words are powerful. James 3 reminds us of the enormous power of the tongue, a power that can be used for good or evil, for praising or cursing, for building up or tearing down. Proverbs 12:18 says: “Reckless” – or unkind – “words pierce like a sword.” But a kind word, a fitting word, an encouraging word, is like a cup of grace.

As someone (George Duncan) has said: “To say what is untrue, what is unkind, or to say it unkindly, constitutes failure in Christian living and Christian witness.” This echoes what Paul says in Ephesians 4:29-30 about not letting any unwholesome, profane, unbecoming talk come out of our mouths and not grieving the Holy Spirit in the things we say or the way we say them. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit with words that are calculated to injure or divide or tear down. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit with a negative, critical, judgmental spirit that finds expression in mean, hurtful, critical words. Let your words always be full of grace (Colossians 4:6), seasoned with kindness.

Forgiveness

The second way to show kindness is in extending grace or forgiveness to others. The simple fact is that everybody needs forgiveness at one time or another. You do. And so do I. Daily. If you withhold it from others – even from someone who betrayed you, who hurt you badly; if you refuse to extend it to others; then you shouldn’t expect others, or even God, to forgive you. If you desire to be forgiven, forgive. Forgiven people forgive people. It is an act of kindness that reflects the heart of God.

Forgiveness is an act of grace. An act of kindness. It is the way God treats us, and the way He wants us to treat one another. As it says in Ephesians 4:32: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Is there someone you need to forgive? Someone who needs your forgiveness? Someone who needs to know that you have forgiven them? Do not hold onto unforgiveness in your heart. Do not allow it to fester in your spirit. Do not allow bitterness to take root in your heart and then grow up and cause trouble to many (Hebrews 12:15). Forgiveness is a choice you make. You may have to make the choice to forgive someone repeatedly, even daily, when reminders of the hurt you suffered at their expense pop up in your spirit.

Acts of Service

The third way to show kindness is through practical acts of service. Not *random* acts of kindness but *intentional, consistent* acts of kindness that are beneficial to others but not required.

Tabitha in Acts 9 is a model for us of what kindness in action looks like. Maybe making robes or other clothing for widows is not your gift. There are other ways to put kindness into action. If someone needs a ride to a doctor’s appointment or to the supermarket, make yourself

available. If there is a death or illness or hospitalization, bring food to bless the family. Send a card. Make a phone call. If someone is in financial need, assist them as God enables you. With their permission, let the church know of their need – let me know, or the deacons, or the elders – so that as a church family we may be able to help.

By God's grace, let's cultivate a lifestyle of kindness in our lives, in our homes, in our marriages, in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our community, and wherever the Lord leads us. The truth is, you can't have too much of the milk of God's kindness.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.