

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 27, 2022**

**THE KINDNESS OF GOD
Titus 3:1-8**

“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).

Last Sunday we focused on the spiritual fruit of kindness, which we defined, with the help of a Nebraska farm girl named Sally from Amor Towles’ novel *The Lincoln Highway*, as “the performance of an act that is both beneficial to another and unrequired.” Another way to describe it is to say that kindness is an expression of love in action. Kindness is not just a feeling. Kindness is not passive. It is not content to be a spectator when there is an opportunity to get involved and help where there is a need.

Because there was not enough time for it last Sunday, today I want us to zero in on what the Bible has to teach us about the kindness of God, which serves as the inspiration and catalyst for us to be people who do not merely perform random acts of kindness but make kindness a way of life.

For some biblical perspective, we turn today to Paul’s Letter to Titus in the latter part of the New Testament. Turn with me in your Bible or one of the pew Bibles to Titus 3:1-8. Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

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I had a couple good quotes on kindness that I didn’t have time to share with you last Sunday. So, you get to hear them today:

Mark Twain, one of the most celebrated authors in American history, once said: “Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.” That is the kind of difference kindness can make.

Novelist Henry James, a contemporary of Twain and the author of such novels as *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Turn of the Screw*, said: “There are three things that are important in human life: The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind.”

There is more to life than kindness, of course. Kindness is not the only thing that is important in life. But it is absolutely essential for a God-pleasing life. While there may be more to life than kindness, there is not less. If we are to be, in Paul’s words, “imitators of God” (Ephesians 5:1), we must live lives marked by kindness and caring for others, because kindness is one of the key attributes of God Himself.

THE CHRESTOTES OF GOD

The word “kindness” (*chrestos* or *chrestotes* in Greek) occurs only 17 times in the New Testament. Nine times it refers to the kindness (or lovingkindness) of God. In Luke 6:35, for example, Jesus tells His followers – which includes you and me in the here and now – to “love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because *He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.*” God is kind not only to the kind, but to the unkind as well. It is an expression of His grace. And He calls us to do the same.

Peter speaks of God’s kindness in 1 Peter 2:3, telling us to live not as spiritual infants but as mature followers of Jesus, “now that you have tasted that *the Lord is kind.*” Some translations say “good” or “gracious,” but the word Peter uses is the New Testament word for “kind” (*chrestos*).

Paul speaks of the kindness of God in Romans 2:4, where He warns against passing judgment on others but stubbornly refusing to recognize our own need for God’s mercy: “Do you show contempt for the riches of (God’s) kindness (*chrestotes*), forbearance, and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness (*chrestotes*) is intended to lead you to repentance?” In *The Message*, it says: “God is kind, but He’s not soft. In kindness He takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life-change” (which is what true repentance is about).

Make sure you don’t miss this truth: One reason God shows kindness to you – and He shows it to us in a thousand ways we probably don’t begin to see – is to bring us to repentance and trusting faith in Him. It is to bring us to the end of ourselves so that we may find real life, true life, abundant life, eternal life in Him. Don’t waste the kindness of God! If you have never embraced His lovingkindness and saving grace, do it now. Do it today. You never know when it will be too late. Even if you’re young and think you have your whole life in front of you. Or, if you have wandered away from the faith, if you have turned away from God, remember His kindness to you and come back to Him. Like the prodigal son, come back home to the Father (Luke 15:11-32). You’ll find Him running to you with open arms and a heart full of love.

Later in Romans, in Romans 11:22, Paul urges us to “consider [both] the kindness (*chrestotes*) and sternness of God.” Paul wants us to understand that God takes sin seriously. He takes disobedience seriously. He takes unbelief seriously. Not that we all don’t occasionally sin in one way or another. We do. All of us. What he is warning against is a persistent lifestyle of unrepentant sin or unbelief. There are consequences. And they are not pleasant. But God shows kindness to sinners who repent of their sin and embrace the gospel.

Paul explains in Titus 3 that the coming of Jesus into the world was a divine act of kindness, or an act of divine kindness. Our salvation is an act of kindness on the part of God. As he says in verses 4 and 5: “But when the kindness (*chrestotes*) and love (*philanthropia*) of God appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy (*eleos*).”

The kindness of God and His love for humankind were the motives behind the coming of Jesus and His saving work on the cross for us.

Listen to this passage from Titus 3 in *The Message*:

1 Remind the people to respect the government and to be law-abiding, always ready to lend a helping hand.

2 No insults, no fights. God's people should be big-hearted and courteous [even toward those with whom we disagree, or who disagree with us]. [There is another whole sermon in unpacking the meaning of these two verses.]

3 It wasn't so long ago that we ourselves were stupid [NIV "foolish"] and stubborn, dupes of sin, ordered every which way by our glands, going around with a chip on our shoulder, hated and hating back.

4 But when God, our kind and loving Savior God, stepped in,

5 He saved us from all that. It was all His doing; we had nothing to do with it. He gave us a good [spiritual] bath, and we came out of it new people, washed inside and out by the Holy Spirit.

6 Our Savior Jesus poured out new life so generously.

7 God's gift has restored our relationship with Him and given us back our lives. And there's more to come – an eternity of life!

8 You can count on this.

"This," says Paul, as he says on several other occasions (1 Timothy 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; and 2 Timothy 2:11), "is a trustworthy saying." In other words, you can bet your life on it.

There is another passage, a parallel passage in the New Testament in which Paul speaks of the incomparable kindness of God. This is what Paul says in Ephesians 2:1-7:

1 As for you [all of you – i.e., all of *us*], you were [spiritually] dead in your transgressions and sins,

2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh [sinful nature] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature [objects] deserving of wrath.

4 But God [I love the word *but!*], who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us,

5 made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus [Paul speaks of a future event as if it were a present reality],

7 in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness (*chrestotes*) to us in Christ Jesus.

Here is what this passage sounds like in the colorful language of *The Message*:

1 It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin.

2 You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience.

3 We all did it, all of us [to one degree or another] doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. [If you're honest, you know it's true.] It's a wonder God didn't lose His temper and do away with the whole lot of us. [Of course, God will never lose His temper, but if He were to do away with us all, it would only be what we deserve.]

4 Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, He embraced us.

5 He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on His own, with no help from us!

6 Then He picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

7 Now God has us right where He wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus.

You see, the mercy, love, grace, and kindness of God are all wrapped up in one ginormous package from which God gives and gives and keeps on giving. It really doesn't get any better than this!

The kindness of God shines through in these and other passages in the New Testament. We see the kindness of God incarnated in the life of Jesus, who, as Peter said in Acts 10:38, "went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil." In other words, Jesus consistently, intentionally, daily performed acts that were both beneficial to others and unrequired. The essence of kindness. And it changed the world. *Jesus* changed the world. He changed my life. I hope you can say the same of your life.

THE HESSED OF GOD

But, you may wonder, what does the Old Testament teach us about the kindness of God? Great question!

The primary Old Testament word for *kindness* is the Hebrew word *hesed*. *Hesed* is not an easy word to translate, which explains why different Bible translations use different words or phrases to try to capture its essence. *Hesed* is used about 250 times in the Old Testament, 128 of them in the Book of Psalms.

When David says in Psalm 23:6 that "goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life," the word translated "mercy" is *hesed*. In Psalm 100:5, when the psalmist declares that "(God's) love endures forever," the word translated "love" is *hesed*.

When Micah declares famously: "(The Lord) has shown you ... what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8) – the word translated "mercy" is *hesed*.

In Hosea 6:6, a verse quoted by Jesus on at least two occasions (Matthew 9:13 and 12:7), the Lord says to His people: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Again, the word translated "mercy" is *hesed*.

Hesed is also translated as “steadfast love” or “unfailing love.” In one of the most beloved passages in the whole Bible, in Lamentations 3:22-23, Jeremiah declares: “Because of the LORD’s steadfast love (*hesed*) we are not consumed, for His compassions [plural] never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.”

God’s *hesed*, in the words of Old Testament scholar John Oswalt, is “a completely undeserved kindness and generosity.” Another biblical scholar, Darrell Bock, describes *hesed* as “wrapping up in itself all the positive attributes of God: love, covenant faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness, loyalty – in short, acts of devotion and loving-kindness that go beyond the requirements of duty” (<https://firmisrael.org>, “The Meaning of *Hesed*”).

God Himself uses the word *hesed* when He reveals Himself and His glory to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34. As the Lord passed in front of Moses in a cloud, He said to Moses: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love (*hesed*) and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin” (34:6-7a). God is saying to Moses: “This is who I AM. This is what I AM. I am compassionate and gracious. I am slow to anger. I am abounding in loving-kindness and faithfulness. I am a forgiving God. I will keep my covenant of *hesed* with my people, even when my people fail to keep the covenant.”

This is who God is. This is how God has acted throughout history. Despite their hard-heartedness, despite their almost continual rebellion against Him, despite their unfaithfulness to Him, God continued to be gracious and compassionate, slow to get angry, abounding in *hesed*, forbearing and forgiving, until the time came to bring judgment on His people. But He never stopped loving them. He never stopped treating them with kindness. And then, in the ultimate act of kindness, He sent His Son into the world to call us to repentance, to show us the way to eternal life, to bring us back into a right relationship with Him through the incarnation, life, suffering, and death of Jesus on the cross. He did all that for sinners like us. *Including* us.

Moses, to whom God revealed Himself in this astonishing way on the mountain, prayed in Psalm 90:14 for the Lord to “satisfy us in the morning with Your unfailing love (*hesed*), that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.” Knowing the *hesed* of the Lord can – and should – fill your heart with joy and gladness.

David had such a profound experience of God’s loving-kindness that he prayed in Psalm 63: “Because Your love (*hesed*) is better than life, my lips will glorify You. I will praise You as long as I live, and in Your name I will lift up my hands.” (By the way, the fact that David could – and did – lift up his hands in worship means that it is okay for us to do it, too. You don’t have to, but you have permission ☺.)

The prophet Micah speaks of God’s *hesed* in Micah 7:18, where he says to the Lord: “Who is a God like You, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy (*hesed*).”

Psalm 33 says:

"... The eyes of the LORD are on those who fear Him,
 On those whose hope is in His unfailing love (*hesed*)....
 We wait in hope for the LORD;
 He is our help and our shield.
 In Him our hearts rejoice,
 For we trust in His holy name.
 May Your unfailing love (*hesed*) rest upon us, O LORD,
 Even as we put our hope in You."
 (Psalm 33:18, 20-22)

About 800 years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Joel called the people of Judah to repent of their evil ways and to turn back to the Lord. Listen to Joel 2:13-14: "Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love (*hesed*), and He relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing"

Isn't this a message our world today needs to hear? And to heed? If God does not always send calamity or chaos or war when it is what we deserve, He sometimes allows it. The Russian war against Ukraine and the rumors or possibilities of other wars with global implications should serve as a wake-up call to us, to our nation, and to people everywhere to return to the Lord in true repentance for our sins. To turn our hearts to Him in faith and devotion. To seek first His kingdom and righteousness (Matthew 6:33). To humble ourselves and pray and seek His face and turn from our evil ways (2 Chronicles 7:14). Beginning with each of us. With you and me.

You can do this – *we* can do this – knowing that God is loving and kind, merciful and gracious and full of compassion, and His character – His *hesed* – will never, ever change.

I hope you are convinced of the kindness of God both as a result of what the Bible tells us about God and because of your own experience of His loving-kindness in a thousand different ways. Because God is kind, constantly doing things that are beneficial to us or to others but are not required, we are to cultivate the spiritual fruit of kindness and give it expression in our lives.

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Do you know about the butterfly effect? An MIT meteorologist named Edward Lorenz conducted some routine experiments on a winter day more than 60 years ago (1961) and discovered that seemingly tiny and insignificant changes in his data could produce huge differences in the final result. It eventually came to be known as "the butterfly effect." In 1972, Lorenz presented a scientific paper entitled: "Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?" The butterfly's wing-flapping doesn't actually cause a tornado, but, according to Lorenz's theory, it can start a chain reaction leading to giant changes in worldwide weather patterns. In other words, even tiny, insignificant movements or actions can produce huge changes that affect thousands, even millions of people. (Kenneth Chang, www.NewYorkTimes.com, April 17, 2008)

There is a similar “butterfly effect” in our lives as followers of Jesus. Showing kindness – performing an act that is beneficial to someone but not required – or exhibiting any of the other varieties of the fruit of the Spirit can have an impact way beyond what you might imagine. An act of kindness, however small or insignificant it may seem, can have, to use another analogy, a domino effect that might blow you away if you could see where it all ends.

Do not doubt the loving-kindness, the *hesed*, of God for you. Rest in it. Rest in *Him*. And make every effort, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to bear the spiritual fruit of kindness in your life. To the glory and praise of God.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.