

The Fruit of the Spirit: Kindness

5/9

Galatians 5:16-26; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

06 26 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Fruit of the Spirit Series

Today we reach the halfway point in our summer worship series entitled *The Fruit of the Spirit*. Galatians 5:22-23 lists nine characteristics of the Christian disciple. This morning we have reached number five: love, joy, peace, patience, and . . . **kindness**.

After the first four elements of the Spirit's fruit, the fifth attribute is a bit of a let down. Kindness doesn't sound like a super holy virtue. The word tastes like a thin, watered down gruel of love.

Being kind is included in *The Boy Scout Law* along with such qualities as being helpful, friendly, courteous, cheerful, and clean. There's certainly nothing wrong with any of these positive traits, but they are hardly the stuff of sainthood.

However, listen closely to our Scripture lesson this morning. In Paul's soul-stirring description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, we hear these words:

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

Meanness

Obviously, Paul sees something much deeper in kindness than simply being nice. How does this expression of the Holy Spirit's presence affect our lives? What makes kindness such a vital, Christian virtue?

One way to define a word is to identify its opposite. An antonym for kindness is **meanness**. We all know the meaning to this word because it's a part of life in our fallen world. People can act in incredibly cruel and mean ways.

In her album, *Speak Now*, Taylor Swift recorded a song simply entitled *Mean*.

*You, with your words like knives and swords and weapons that you use against me
You have knocked me off my feet again got me feeling like I'm nothing
You, with your voice like nails on a chalkboard, calling me out when I'm wounded
You, pickin' on the weaker man. Why you gotta be so mean?*

This clip from *Despicable Me* reminds us that some people are just MEAN!

It sounds simple to the point of being simplistic; however, the first step towards kindness is avoiding meanness.

In 1739, a group of believers approached John Wesley in London. They asked the founder of the Methodist movement to assist them in their spiritual walk. The group began to meet weekly, and this was the start of the Methodist “*class system*.” Small groups of twelve Christians would meet weekly for mutual support and accountability.

Wesley developed three simple guidelines for the classes that he called ***The General Rules***. The First Rule simple stated: ***Do no harm***. This is the Christian ethic stated in the negative. It tells us what NOT to do.

The Silver Rule states *The Golden Rule* in negative terms: “*Don’t do to others what you don’t want done to you.*” One of the basic principles of *The Hippocratic Oath* taken by doctors is “*First, do no harm.*” If you cannot do any good, then at least don’t do any bad. Do no harm. Don’t be unkind. Don’t be mean.

Centuries after John Wesley there was a Methodist minister some of you may have heard of named Sam Jones. Our namesake never emphasized theology. He once said: “*I always did despise theology and botany, but I do love religion and flowers!*” An emphasis on action rather than belief became a hallmark of the evangelist’s preaching. Like James in the New Testament, Jones believed that “*faith without works is dead.*”

Jones declared: “*The best thing a person can do is to do right and the worst thing a person can do is to do wrong!*” I TOLD YOU he wasn’t much of a theologian! He spoke against bicycles, “Sabbath desecration,” the theater, cards, dancing, “dime” novels, and of course alcohol. He seldom criticized tobacco, however, because he never kicked the habit himself!

Jones message was summed up in his most famous sermon entitled “**Quit Your Meanness.**” In an almost simplistic message, Jones said, “*Just quit your meanness and follow along in the footsteps of Jesus.*” Kelso Carter, the composer of “*Standing on the Promises,*” wrote a song for Jones’ revivals. One stanza said:

*“Take care, take care, the doom of sin is nigh!
Beware, beware, or you will surely die!
The Judgment Day is coming fast; O sinner hear the cry!
Now you better quit your meanness!”*

“*Quit your meanness*” hardly seems like a great challenge. It is not a grand call to holiness and righteousness. Jones does not echo the Wesleyan call to Christian perfection. Instead, he just tells people to stop being so mean!

When we were young, calling another child “**mean**” was one of the worst charges a person could make. Meanness encompasses a host of cruel acts that deliberately hurt others. It is the small change of human depravity; but it encompasses much of the evil we do to one another.

Kindness

The Holy Spirit calls us to quit our meanness and start our kindness! In Christian living, *The Silver Rule* is superseded by *The Golden Rule*: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The second of John Wesley’s *General Rules* is “**Do good.**” After we do no harm, we are called to actively seek the best for ourselves and others. “Do no harm” draws the boundaries within which we are called to live. Then we are freed up to do good.

Imagine a blank canvass in a frame. Avoiding harm is the framework of the picture. We then get to paint the canvas with acts of goodness and love.

In Christian discipleship, there is a relationship between BEING good and DOING good. Our goal is to become like Jesus Christ. In fact, “*Christian*” literally means “*Christ-like.*” Romans 8:29 says that God’s ultimate goal is for us “*to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.*” BEING good comes from a lifelong relationship with Jesus Christ. Spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible study, worship, fellowship, and service enable us to grow in grace.

BEING good leads us to DOING good. We attempt to act out our faith in daily life. Who we are should be reflected in how we live. If our coworkers, neighbors, or friends visited church next week, then they shouldn’t be surprised to see us here!

Paul said that works without faith is dead. James said that faith without works is dead! They are two sides of the same coin. BEING leads to DOING; and DOING leads to BEING. They become a self-reinforcing cycle of faith and works, and work and faith, and faith and works, and

How Good?

So “Do no harm” and “Do good.” The first two rules sound simple enough. However, this leads to an important follow-up question: “**How MUCH good?**” Listen to the message of this poem:

*I have wept in the night
For the shortness of sight
That to somebody’s need made me blind:
But I never have yet
Felt a twinge of regret
For being a little too kind!*

We are all willing to do SOME good and do our part. Put an extra \$20 in the offering plate for a special cause. Drop loose change into the Salvation Army bucket during the holidays. Donate a bag of canned goods for the *Scary to be Hungry* food drive. Bring something to church for the monthly “Basket Ministry.” Buy some Girl Scout cookies. Give at the office to *United Way*.

But how much is ENOUGH? I mean, this doing good thing could quickly get out of hand! I’m willing to do my part, but I want to know exactly what my part might be.

When teachers assign projects to students, they often supply a “rubric.” The instruction sheet spells out the expectations along with the grading scale. I’m a big fan of rubrics because I want to know the expectations up-front.

Most of us would like a rubric from God defining just how Christian we have to be. Forget about making a 100—we just want to know where the Pass/Fail line is located! And to give us credit, I think once we knew the minimum expectations, then we would be willing to do more. Just not TOO much more.

I've got good news for you. Jesus DID define how much we had to do. When asked he said, "*Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as you love yourself.*" That's all! Love of God, neighbor, and self is what paints the picture inside the law's frame.

Here is the challenge: love does not speak a language of limits. The very act of defining how much love is enough love undermines Christian love. There is no such thing as "enough." A rubric does not exist. Our part is God's part, and God's part is love without end, Amen. So doing good means doing our absolute best with no question of "How much?" and "When's enough?"

John Wesley once said:

*Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.*

ALL, y'all—that's a lot of good. So we need to get our "cans" to work!

Kindness in Action

Kindness is belief in action. It expresses extraordinary faith in ordinary ways. Those who talk the talk are called to walk the walk. Listen to the words of Edgar Guest's poem entitled *I'd Rather See a Sermon*:

*I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear,
Fine counsel is confusing, but example's always clear;
And the best of all preachers are the men who live their creeds,
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.
I soon can learn to do it if you'll let me see it done;
I can watch your hands in action, but your tongue too fast may run.
And the lecture you deliver may be very wise and true,
But I'd rather get my lessons by observing what you do,
For I might misunderstand you and the high advice you give,
But there's no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.*

PP10 29 GIFTS

The book, **29 Gifts**, chronicles the story of Cami Walker. One month after her wedding day, the 33 year old woman was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. All of her plans and dreams changed in an instant. The neurological disease quickly took a toll on her body and marriage. Each day negative thoughts swarmed through her head: *“I’m going to end up in a wheelchair. Mark’s probably going to leave me. My life is over. Why did this have to happen to me?”*

Then Cami had a life-changing encounter with a friend from Africa. The woman gave her a simple prescription: “Give away 29 gifts in 29 days.” Her friend said, “By giving, you are focusing on what you have to offer others, inviting more abundance into your life.” The gifts could be anything large or small, but they had to be mindful and authentic. One of the gifts had to be something that was scarce in her life.

The book recounts how Cami discovered the gift of giving. Many of the gifts were quite simple—a phone call, spare change, a Kleenex. Over the month, however, the young woman was transformed by these acts of kindness. Her experience has become the basis of a worldwide giving movement.

In this scene from *Evan Almighty*, we are reminded how even small actions can make a big difference in others’ lives.

Conclusion

In February 2005, an anonymous donor gave our church \$5,000 to be used in a special way. The following Sunday there were a number of envelopes place on the altar table. Each envelope contained a \$20 bill along with a Scripture verse. Members were invited to take an envelope and use the money to help others in need.

The ministry’s acronym was **RACK** which stood for **Random Acts of Christian Kindness**. There were only three guidelines:

- The money could not be used for personal benefit.
- The money could not be given to an organization or institution.
- The money should be given to a person in real need.

A representative from each family present was invited to take an envelope. Over the following weeks, people shared amazing grace stories of how the Holy Spirit had used simple acts of kindness to impact others’ lives. Listen to just a few:

- “Leaving the grocery store, I saw a women getting into a car with several small children. The mother was crying because she needed more money to pay for her child’s prescription. I was able to help her buy the medicine.”
- “I used the money to fill three wicker baskets with lotion, soap, and other goodies. I’ve shared them with two neighbors, and I’m still looking for another ‘down and out’ person to help.”

- “I was waiting in the doctor’s office and met a stranger scheduled for surgery. Her husband was out of work, and they had two small children at home. When I shared the envelope, I don’t know who was happier—me or the recipient!”
- “We shared the money with someone disabled in an accident. We marvel at his spirit and zest for life. He was so appreciative and just couldn’t believe our church family could be so generous and caring, thanking us over and over. His smile made it all worthwhile.”

This morning you will notice we have **envelopes on the altar**. As you leave today, each person here is invited to pick one up. They contain . . . absolutely nothing! Acts of Christian kindness do not require an envelope or a \$20 bill. We each have the opportunity to perform them daily.

The RACK envelope along with the money and card simply served as reminders to go out and look for an opportunity to be kind to others. Put the envelope on your refrigerator, car dash, or bathroom counter. Allow it to serve as a reminder: do no harm—quit your meanness. Do good—be kind.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, and . . . kindness. After all, love IS kind.

Amen.