

“Heavenly Virtues - Kindness”

Proverbs 11:17; Galatians 5:22–23;

Luke 10:33–37; Matthew 25:37–46

“You cannot do a kindness too soon, for you never know how soon it will be too late.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson



Be kind. Be nice. For most of us, I think these two words are pretty much synonymous. And therein lies the problem. There is no fire, no passion in niceness. Our task this week is to resurrect the virtue, kindness, from the clutches of niceness.

So, as we have weekly in this series, we'll let Karen Prior Swallow set the stage for us:

Kindness is unlike other virtues in that “we know exactly what it is, in most everyday situations; and yet our knowing what it is makes it easier to avoid.” We “are profoundly ambivalent about kindness” in that we “are never as kind as we want to be, but nothing outrages us more than people being unkind to us.”

Kindness isn't natural to most of us, which is why it is a virtue that needs to be taught and cultivated...Kindness isn't sexy. It doesn't dazzle you with wit and charm and verve. We want to be with the kind, even if we don't want to be the kind. People envy the rich, the beautiful, the powerful, the courageous, and the wise. Do we ever envy the kind?

Envy, in fact, is the vice that, in the classical tradition, opposes kindness. Perhaps this seems strange until we look at what kindness truly is.

Kindness isn't mere niceness. Although kind and nice are nearly synonymous now, the history of both words shows a once-sharp difference that is still helpful to consider today. Nice comes from a Latin word that means “unknowing” or “ignorant” and in Middle English came to mean “senseless” or “foolish.” The linguist Henry Watson Fowler opines, in his characteristically colorful way, that the current meaning of nice as similar to kind came about when nice became “too great a favourite with the ladies who have charmed out of it all its individuality and converted it into a mere diffuser of vague and mild agreeableness.”

In its etymology, kind means something radically different from mere agreeableness. Indeed, kind, rightly understood, can include all sorts of disagreeableness. Kind comes from the same root from which we get the word kin. To be kind, then, is to treat someone like they are family.

To possess the virtue of kindness is to be in the habit of treating all people as if they were family [emphasis added].

Kindness is like love. The love we have for family members takes different forms. It is not all Christmas mornings and movie nights. But it is always seeking and celebrating the good of that person. The same is true of kindness. As Augustine says of the virtuous life in *City of God*, a life characterized by kindness “is social, and for its own sake values the good of friends as its own, just as it wishes for them, for their own sake, what it wishes for itself.” Augustine then explains that by “friends” he means members of the family, household, community, and world—even the angels. All are kin.¹

As a preacher's kid, I literally grew up in the church. One of the churches my dad served had the habit of calling each other brother and sister, as in “Brother David.” I remember thinking it was just kind of weird, but now I get it. All those in Christ are part of a new family for which Christ is the head (Mark

¹ Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

3:31-35). Thus, it ought to be easy to treat other Christians as family, showering all of them with kindness. But what about all the other people in our lives, the ones who don't know Jesus. Is kindness due them? One of Jesus' parables answers that question for us.

A story of kindness

The so-called Parable of the Good Samaritan is the best-known of all Jesus' parables. People who don't know anything about Jesus or the Bible know that being a Good Samaritan is about helping someone in trouble. We even have Good Samaritan laws that protect from blame those who help others who have been injured.

A casual, uninformed reading of the parable leads to an inarguable conclusion – if someone needs help, even someone you don't know, step up and help them. This is absolutely in keeping with Jesus' teaching and even our own consciences. But Jesus would hardly use a parable to convey such an obvious and uncontroversial point. No, there is much more going on in this story.

First, pull out a Bible and read the whole parable (Luke 10:25-37) and go over the exchange between the lawyer and Jesus. The lawyer wants to know how to inherit eternal life. A bit later in the story, we learn that this legal expert thinks he knows the answer, indeed, knows the answer better than Jesus. The lawyer's question is a challenge – but about what?

Jesus asks the man to tell him is contained in the Law, and the lawyer responds as Jesus would – love God and love neighbor (see Matthew 22:34-39). These statements were foundational in Judaism; both are drawn from the Law of Moses. The parable is focused on the second commandment: love your neighbor (Leviticus 19:18).

But the lawyer won't stop there. Trying to show everyone that he is cleverer and more knowledgeable than Jesus, the lawyer goes on to ask "Who is my neighbor?" The very fact that he asks the question reveals that the man isn't nearly as smart as he thinks he is. He would know the right answer if he really comprehended God's Law. Further, the question is a trap. Social boundaries were central to Jewish society, as they struggled to maintain a distinct separate identity from the pagan world around them. Boundary markers, such as Sabbath observance and circumcision, were cherished and protected to a fault. The lawyer asks a dangerous question and Jesus knows that he has a dangerous answer, one that will offend and probably not even be understood. Thus, given the tricky ground, Jesus answers the lawyer with a story.

The parable begins with an unidentified man who is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, which lies a short distance to the northeast. Certainly, Jesus' listeners would have assumed the man is Jewish and would have identified with him as he is beaten and left for dead. When Jesus tells of a priest that passes by and then a Levite (the tribe of priests), his listeners probably expected that the third person, the hero, would be a regular Jew like them. Then, the story would become a pretty standard anticlerical warning.

But that isn't what Jesus does at all. Instead, the hero of the story is a Samaritan! The shock here is lost on us unless we know that the Samaritans were despised by the Jews. Not just disliked but hated. Jews allowed themselves no contact at all with Samaritans. When Jesus once asked a Samaritan woman for a drink, she was shocked, for a Jew would never do such a thing (see John 4 for the whole story).

Jesus' listeners were probably not even sure they would have accepted help from a Samaritan. And then Jesus goes on to detail at length all the aid and compassion that the Samaritan provides, skillfully driving home that it is a Samaritan who not only helps, but is the one who understands what God really means by "neighbor."

So far so good. Now substitute the word "family" for "neighbor." Then loving your neighbor becomes loving him or her like family. That is true kindness. That is what the Samaritan showers on the injured

man. He treats the poor soul as if he were the Samaritan's brother or uncle, even paying for his lodging. Would you do less for your own family?

Jesus' parable is part and parcel of his teaching about loving our enemies. It is true, as he says, that anyone can love their friends and family. But loving our enemies? Who can really do that? Perhaps this becomes clearer if we consider that Jesus isn't asking us to deny our feelings, though he might be hoping they change. Rather, he is challenging us to act toward our enemy in ways that are grounded in love – even if we don't feel like it. And what word is about acting in love, as if the person were family? Kindness. Far more than niceness, isn't it!

The opposite of kindness

We can get further with this when we grasp that the opposing vice to kindness is envy. I don't think that is obvious because we've allowed kind to mean little more than nice. Karen Prior Swallow again:

The connection between kindness and kinship helps make sense of the reason for envy being the vice that opposes kindness. Aquinas calls envy "sorrow for another's good." Unless the relationship is marred by some dysfunction, it is natural for us to celebrate a family member's happiness or success. When something good happens to someone in our family, it is like it has happened to us. We share in that good rather than envy it. To seek and celebrate the good for others is then to treat them as family in this way. This is what it means to be kind.

...If kindness means treating someone like family, then kindness must include all the varieties of ways that family members show love for one another through the entire range of circumstances, conditions, and situations they find themselves in. Sometimes loving a family member requires gentleness. Sometimes toughness. Often forbearance. Always honesty and truth. . . . The truth is often not pleasant or agreeable. A mere acquaintance might be nice enough to say that your new hairstyle is attractive even if it isn't, but a true friend—someone who is more like family—would be kind to point out that another style is more suited to you.²

Finally

Throughout the gospels, we find Jesus teaching and embodying love, smashing boundaries, embracing everyone as kin, showing each one kindness. This is the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Those lined up at the judgment seat are the "nations" which in first-century Judaism meant the pagans, those outside God's family. What is expected of them? To treat all as family, including those who had no real place in Greco-Roman society, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned. How were they to be treated? Like kin, with kindness.

Daily Bible Readings *More on kindness*

Monday	Joshua 2	Rahab hides the Israelite spies, putting herself at great risk.
Tuesday	2 Kings 9	David's kindness toward Mephibosheth
Wednesday	Acts 3:1-10; 4:5-12	Peter performs a kindness by healing a crippled beggar
Thursday	Acts 28:1-10	Paul is shown "unusual kindness" by the islanders when he shipwrecked near Malta
Friday	Ephesians 4:25-5:2	Be kind to one another
Saturday	2 Timothy 2:24-26	The Lord's servant must be kind to everyone.

² Ibid.