

## **Fruits of the Spirit: In Defense of Kindness**

Galatians 5:22-26

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*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things....If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.*

Galatians 5:22-26 NRSV

I was reading an article by Professor Christine Pohl in *The Christian Century*. She writes:

I spend quite a lot of time reflecting on the human capacity for evil. Perhaps that is an occupational hazard for anyone who teaches Christian ethics. Then, as an act of moral self-preservation surely connected to God's mercy, I eventually turn to considering the Virtues or practices that stand most directly in contrast to various forms of wickedness. (1)

She invites the reader to think of a few important contrasts (betrayal and fidelity, deception and truthfulness, cruelty and hospitality). She then turns to one of the fruits of the Spirit that we read about in Paul's letter to the Galatians – Kindness.

I recently surprised myself when I started to think about kindness. Kindness—as in random acts of? As in often mistaken for weakness? As in being nice? Does kindness really stand in contrast to wickedness in some substantive way? I wondered. It was after I had encountered several deeply disturbing accounts of utterly ruthless behavior that my reflections on kindness emerged. (2)

I am not sure if I agree that ruthlessness is the opposite of kindness. What word would you choose? Maybe meanness, bullying, what about oppression? I invite you wonder with me about this action and trait of kindness in Paul's list and why it matters. And what kindness looks like in different contexts.

Sometimes when I think of kindness as a fruit of the Spirit in my life and in our church, I think about compassion and actions that reflect caring and patience. That is part of it. But Paul is interested in why and how this fruit ripens and is evident in people's lives. What is the deeper source? And when we don't "feel" like being kind, what does that mean?

We usually recognize cruelty and kindness when we see or experience them. In the presence of cruel or heartless behavior, we are wary and defensive; when we encounter kindness, we feel sufficiently safe to lay down our weapons – real or emotional. While cruelty leaves a trail of destruction, a truly kind person is able to find beauty and goodness amid ashes.

Kindness frequently appears in New Testament lists of the characteristics of those who have been made new by the transforming power of Jesus through the Spirit. Kindness is an expression of the new life, the new self and the new creation (see, for example, Galatians. 5:22, 6:15; Ephesians. 4:22–32; Colossians. 3:1–12).

When Paul lists the “fruit of the spirit” in Galatians 5, he locates kindness after love, joy, peace and patience and before generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Because qualities like kindness, love, generosity and gentleness have significant overlapping spiritual and moral terrain, we might wonder if each one has any distinctive features. Why include kindness as a separate category? What makes it a mark of the spirit-filled new creation?

There is a strong biblical thread that leads us to the answer. God’s loving-kindness (Hebrew word is *hesed*) sustains us and this strong covenantal emphasis runs through the scriptures. That which is good and pleasing to God is summed up in Micah 6:8 - “to do justice, and to love kindness [*hesed*], and to walk humbly with your God.” Our kindness reflects and is empowered by God’s kindness. When Paul seeks to describe and define love in 1 Corinthians 13, he writes that “love is kind.”

In Greek, the language for kindness includes an element of usefulness or showing oneself useful to another. This suggests a certain sturdiness and practicality in the New Testament usage that is less common to our understanding. Kindness is far more than a single or random action; it is part of a way of life characterized by moral attentiveness that is both respectful of—and helpful to—others. Kindness involves a recognition of our common humanity and frailty that leads us to care about each person’s particular well-being and to treat him or her as deserving of generous response and respect. Kindness can be expressed through our words or actions.

The important connection between kindness and truthfulness reminds us that the virtues and practices of following the ways of Jesus are dependent on each other. Unless accompanied by a practice of truthfulness, kindness quickly degenerates into an insipid and often dishonest form of being nice.

So kindness is a gift of the Spirit. It is something we recognize even if we cannot define it. It comes for the source, *Hesed* – Divine Loving Kindness. It is the opposite of cruelty and meanness and seems to be more than being nice.

Paul is making a strong argument in Galatians. He is writing an impassioned letter to the church in Galatia where a group of original Christians, that is, Jewish Christians, had arrived among the new gentile Christians and brought their list with them of what they needed to do to be considered right with God. And while this list had clearly been meaningful for them, it was a barrier to God for the Galatians, who had come to Jesus with completely different

versions of slavery, and different abuses of freedom, and a different experience of salvation. The paradigm didn't translate, and the list they brought became lifeless shackles. (3)

Paul says - You are freed for freedom in Christ. Freed! Freed to live as real humans, as image-bearer of the Divine! Freed to live for each other, to live in the love you were created for to begin with!

It might be helpful to turn to a modern translation of Galatians 5:13-21 – The Message

*It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: ...loveless, cheap sex; a rotten accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; the worship of possessions and power; cults of personality; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community.*

And then Paul describes true freedom, living as we were meant to live, in a list we've written in sharpie and hung up in grapes, apples and oranges in Sunday school rooms throughout the decades, aka, the fruit of the Spirit, which could sound something like this:

*But what happens when we live God's way? The Spirit brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to direct our energies wisely. (Galatians 5:22-25 The Message)*

Yes. That is the kind of life we are invited to experience here together as a church, as a community of faith, a vision for the kin-dom of God, connected to one another and the source of Divine Love and all creation as we follow the ways of Jesus. Jesus embodied the fruits of the fullness of life.

But this life, this lens, this living, takes practice and is hard. I feel the weight when some people in our country and community and online live in ways that demean others and refuse to see the humanity in people who are different. There are days when my anger about policies regarding refugees and guns and women's bodies make me want to yell at people who are ignoring basic truths and compassion and respect for universal human rights. Living in community that bears fruit of the Spirit means we are together in this so we encourage each other. We are bold together in our loving kindness toward people. We talk and act and reflect on the ways we do that. There are many ways to be and actions to take when there is work to be done.

Maybe we are feeling sadness or rage or fear today because of the actions of the Supreme Court this week. Let's be kind to ourselves and let those emotions flow. Sometimes that is what kindness looks like as the Spirit calls us and comforts us and challenges us.

I have been reading a book this week by Bruce Reyes Chow called *In Defense of Kindness – Why It Matters, How it Changes Our Lives and How it Can Save the World*. It was published in 2021. Bruce is a Presbyterian pastor who has served in the Bay Area and was a moderator of the PCUSA. I think his message about kindness is a much needed message in a world filled with violence, intolerance, poverty and racism. We must resist reducing one another or ourselves to one dimension, one characteristic. Kindness is not just the absence of being mean or hateful. Being kind entails actively resisting actions or ideas that rob others of dignity.

Here is his definition: *To be kind is to accept that each person is a created and complex human being and to treat them as if you believe this to be true. (4)*

Reyes-Chow acknowledges that there are nay sayers, kindness haters. Defend it everyday and commit to this way of being, bearing this fruit in your life and in the world.

Close with a list from his book.

They say, "Kindness is weakness." I say, "Kindness is strength."

They say, "Kindness is naiveté." I say, "Kindness takes courage."

They say, "Kindness is superficial." I say, "Kindness has depth."

They say, "Kindness is passive." I say, "Kindness is active."

They say, "Kindness is complicity." I say, "Kindness is justice."

They say, "Kindness is abdication." I say, "Kindness is confrontation."

They say, "Kindness is abstract." I say, "Kindness is personal."

They say, "Kindness is distraction." I say, "Kindness is commitment."

They say, "Kindness is disingenuous." I say, "Kindness is vulnerability."

They say, "Kindness is futile." I say, "Kindness is transformational."

They say, "Kindness is a waste of time." I say, "Kindness is an abundance of hope." (5)

This week, in the midst of a world that is diverse and divided, may we choose kindness because it is an act of courage that challenges a worldview often driven by hatred, dishonesty and dehumanization. Let us bear that fruit as we seek to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. Amen.

1) and 2) <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-10/recovering-kindness>

3) <https://kara-root.blogspot.com/search?q=Galatians+5>

4) and 5) Bruce Reyes-Chow, *In Defense of Kindness: Why It Matters, How It Changes Our Lives, and How It Can Save the World*. (Chalice Press, 2021), pg. 2-4, 12-14