

COLLECTIVE

Life in the Spirit Series (Lesson 13)

Fruit of the Spirit – Kindness

Our connect group lessons this year will focus primarily on Galatians 5.

In our previous lessons, we learnt about Love, Joy, Peace and Patience. In this lesson, we begin our study on the 5th Fruit of the Spirit – Kindness.

Read: Galatians 5:16-25

If patience is a tough fruit of the Spirit, then kindness is a tender one. It is interesting that Paul puts kindness right after patience. Perhaps that's because he saw both of them as essential qualities of love—the first fruit of the Spirit.

“Love is patient, love is kind,” (1 Corinthians 13:4). That's so true, isn't it? When you love people, you find it easier (or at least a bit less difficult) to be patient with them. And being kind to others is one of the most noticeable characteristics of a genuinely loving person.

In the Old Testament, God is often praised for his kindness. There is a beautiful word in Hebrew — “*hesed*” — which is so rich in meaning that it gets translated in many ways. Very often it is translated as “love,” with an emphasis on the faithfulness that is an essential part of genuine love. So sometimes “*hesed*” is translated “faithful love.”

Sometimes it can mean “loyalty,” when one person acts out of a strong sense of commitment to another person because of the relationship between them. When God acts with “*hesed*” it can mean that he exercises “mercy” toward people who are in a vulnerable or needy situation, so it is quite close to “compassion,” which is another word that occurs very often in the Old Testament.

Jesus was kindness incarnate. If there was a book to write on the life of Jesus, we can call it “a theology of interruptions.” Because so many of the things that Jesus said or did in the Gospel stories happened because somebody interrupted him when he was actually doing something else, on a journey, visiting, or eating. Yet Jesus responded to these interruptions not with irritation and dismissal but with kindness and warmth. And in many cases, he showed this respectful kindness to people whom society typically rejected and shunned.

Think of the woman with bleeding, interrupting him on the way to an urgent medical emergency; think of the parents bringing their children when his disciples were wanting to get on with their private lessons; think of blind Bartimaeus who kept shouting over the crowd until Jesus stopped; think of the Syro-Phoenician woman who would not take no for an answer; think of the woman who anointed his feet at a meal, and scandalized the host. Even in Jesus' excruciating agony on the cross, he was thinking of the needs of his mother. And after his resurrection, he knew that hungry fishermen needed a good breakfast after a night at sea.

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So, if being a disciple of Jesus means that I ought to follow his example, why do we so often fail to take the time to be kind to others in daily life?

It is probably because we are being self-protective, or too busy and do not want to be interrupted. We've got things to do, people to see, work to get done. We're out and about, going somewhere, have an agenda, a schedule and time is precious. So, we let the moment fly. We are not willing to let our life be interrupted in order to show kindness to someone else. Not very like Jesus.

The challenge of exercising kindness, even in stressful circumstances, is therefore something that has to be faced. We need to remember that kindness is part of the fruit of the Spirit precisely because it does not come naturally (even though it is true that some people seem to be just more naturally kind than others). But the sort of kindness Paul is talking about is not "natural," but "spiritual," in that it comes from being filled with God's Spirit.

Such kindness is fruit (it grows because of the life of the Spirit within us), but it also has to be cultivated. It has to become a habit that builds into our character. How do you know something has become a habit? Only when it becomes more natural to say and do what is kind than not to.

It has become a habit when you do not have to stop and think and check the many negative reasons before offering to help someone. It has become a habit when we feel bad because we fail to do and say what is kind, or when we behave in ways that we know were unkind.

At such moments we should be challenging ourselves - How could I possibly do that? How could I, as a Christian, be so unkind? And then, of course, we should come back to the Lord to ask for forgiveness and grace. For we all fail at times. But if kindness as the fruit of the Spirit is beginning to grow within us, then we will notice the failure far more painfully and want to ask for grace to do better next time.

As we go out into each day, in our travel and work, and the constant rubbing of shoulders with other people, why don't we ask God for opportunities to show kindness?

- 1) Who can I thank today?**
- 2) Where can I give a smile or a word of appreciation?**
- 3) What will I do if I meet someone in need? Am I prepared in advance to try to help if I can?**
- 4) Who can I show "the kindness of the Lord" to?**

Here is something that may help us move in that direction.

There are two places in Colossians 3 where Paul begins a sentence with, "Whatever you do," which simply means, "in everything you do".

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The first is: “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17). Now, to do something “in the name of” Jesus means that I am doing something that he would do if he were present.

It means that I am acting as though Christ himself were acting in and through me. So, the question that this text raises is this: If I “were Christ, what would I do for that other person? What would Jesus do in this situation?

The second example from Colossians 3 is: “Whatever you do . . . [do it] as working for the Lord”. That means I should act as if the other person were Christ. What I am doing to or for the other person, I am doing to or for him. Paul was writing this to Christian slaves working for Christian and non-Christian masters.

But Paul tells them very clearly that even slaves could serve Christ by working hard and honestly for their masters. So, this raises another startling question in our minds: If that person were Christ, what would I do for him or her? How would I behave right now if that were Christ in front of me?

Supposing then we lived each day with those two questions in our minds:

- 1) What would I do for people if I were Christ?**
- 2) What would I do for people if they were Christ?**

Wouldn't that make a difference in how we treat other people? What lengths of kindness would we show to others if we asked ourselves those questions and lived out the answers?