

## “The Fruit of the Spirit: Kindness”

(Galatians 5.22-23a); Ruth 1:1-10; 2 Samuel 9:1-11

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October 21, 2018

The fruit of the Spirit is ... *kindness*. Merriam-Webster defines kindness as “the quality or state of being kind,” that is, “of a sympathetic or helpful nature,” as in “I was helped by a kind neighbor,” or “they were very kind to us;” or “of a forbearing nature,” as in “kind treatment of animals;” or “arising from or characterized by sympathy or forbearance,” as in “a kind act” or “a kind smile.” We all know the word; sometime people practice “random acts of kindness.” One example that comes immediately to mind is something our former neighbor used to do: when there was a heavy snowfall, Chris would get out his snowblower and often clear not only his sidewalk, but ours too. He didn’t expect anything in return; there was no price tag attached to it; this was not *quid pro quo*, “something for something,” “this for that” – no, he just felt like he wanted to do us that favor, that act of kindness, and we appreciated it.

The word for “kindness” shows up a few times in the New Testament as one of the various things we Christians are called to do for one another. It’s here in Paul’s list of nine “fruits of the Spirit,” but in a couple other places as well:

- As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Colossians 3:12)
- Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:32)

This Greek word means pretty much the same thing our English word does, although I couldn’t find any clear example in the New Testament of what this looks like in actual practice. The biblical writers clearly assumed their readers knew what this word meant, and didn’t need to explain it.

But when the word shows up in the New Testament, in the vast majority of instances, it’s actually referring to the kindness of *God*:

- Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. (Luke 6:35)
- Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (Romans 2:4)
- Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but

God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness.... (Romans 11:22)

- ... so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:7)
- Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; for you have tasted the kindness of the Lord. (1 Peter 2:2-3)

Kindness, then, is an attribute of God. Just like *patience* last week, this word is used to describe *what God is actually like*. God is *kind*. How is God kind? The Romans 11 passage talks about how God, in his kindness, extended the offer of salvation to the entire non-Jewish world. The Ephesians 2 passage talks about how God, in his kindness, forgave us our sins, made us alive with Christ, raised us up in Christ, and offers us a magnificent inheritance, rich in grace. That's a lot of kindness! It's a manifestation of God's love, that God does all these *kind things* for us. This passage particularly struck me:

- But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:4-5)

I was struck by two things. First, there is a clear and direct link between God's kindness, our salvation, and God's mercy. We don't deserve the magnificent gift of salvation that God grants to us; we haven't earned it; it's all because of God's mercy, a magnificent act (but not a "random" act!) of *kindness* towards us. The second thing that struck me was the phrase "*loving kindness*." God isn't just kind; God is *lovingly* kind. Seeing those words linked together immediately brought to my mind the Old Testament concept of "loving kindness," in Hebrew, *chesed*. (That's a guttural "ch" sound, like in *Chanukah* or *challah* bread.) This is a really important word, like that word *shalom* (peace) which we talked about a couple weeks ago; it shows up *hundreds* of times in the Old Testament, especially in reference to God. "Loving kindness" is one translation, "steadfast love" is another. Consider these examples:

- O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love (loving kindness) endures forever. (1 Chronicles 16:34; Psalm 106:1; Psalm 107:1; etc.)
- I trusted in your steadfast love (loving kindness); my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. (Psalm 13:5)
- Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love (loving kindness) to me when I was beset as a city under siege. (Psalm 31:21)
- Your steadfast love (loving kindness), O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. (Psalm 36:5)
- Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love (loving kindness); according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. (Psalm 51:1)
- I will sing praises to you, for you, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love (loving kindness). (Psalm 59:17)

On and on it goes – those are just six examples, out of literally *hundreds* I could give you. All of those that I have just listed are from the Psalms, because the Psalms extol the loving kindness of God over and over again, but I could just as easily have found examples from many other places throughout the Old

Testament. The ancient Israelites wholeheartedly understood that *God is a God of steadfast love*. Sometimes I wonder if our society today has forgotten that. All the goodness, all the blessings, all the mercies, all the beauty, all the things that God does to bring healing to your body, restoration to your relationships, and peace to your soul – that’s God’s *loving kindness* at work.

It’s that kind of *loving kindness* which the Holy Spirit implants in our hearts, and which we are to extend to other people. It’s hard to find clear examples of loving kindness in the New Testament, but there certainly are in the Old. Here are a couple that stand out:

(1) King David showed loving kindness to a young man named Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth was the son of David’s close friend Jonathan and the grandson of King Saul, both of whom had died in battle when Mephibosheth was very young. David wanted to show “the kindness of God” to someone in that family. When David learned that Mephibosheth had become crippled in his feet and unable to walk, David gave to Mephibosheth a large parcel of land, and the privilege of living and eating in David’s palace for the rest of his life. That’s an example of *loving kindness* in action. (2 Samuel 9)

(2) This story may be a little more familiar to you: Ruth shows loving kindness to her mother-in-law Naomi. Naomi was an Israelite, but due to a famine she and her husband had moved to the country of Moab, where their two sons married Moabite women. But all three men die, leaving the women to take care of each other – the two Moabite women and their Israelite mother-in-law. After a time, Naomi decides to return to the land of her birth, and Ruth accompanies her, leaving her own homeland out of her devotion – her loving-kindness – towards Naomi. (Ruth 1)

In the one case, a young crippled man is blessed with fortune and a good home; in the other, an elderly widow is blessed with companionship and someone to look after her. *Loving kindness*. Like the *loving kindness* of God, who blesses us in a multitude of ways, not because he *has* to, but because he *wants* to.

So, then: we are instructed to “be kind to one another”, to offer *this kind of loving kindness* towards our fellow sisters and brothers. We are instructed to “clothe ourselves with kindness.” That doesn’t just mean being *nice* to one another, *polite*, *respectful*. That means, when someone is hurting or in need, going *out of our way* to bless them, in a way that will touch and grace their lives, *permanently*.

You may have noticed that we’re talking about more than just *good deeds* or *little favors*. There’s a *lavishness* to this, an *extravagance*. This doesn’t mean you have to offer lavish kindness to *everybody*. Realistically, you probably can’t. God offers lavish kindness to everybody. But David offered lavish kindness to Mephibosheth, and Ruth offered lavish kindness to Naomi. Maybe there’s someone out there God is nudging you to bless in special ways. Someone to *adopt*, literally or figuratively.

Kindness is more than just an *instruction*. It’s a *gift of the Holy Spirit*. It’s the Holy Spirit, working in our hearts, *motivating* us to offer help, *prompting* us to reach out, *nudging* us to bless. We don’t do it just because the Bible *tells* us to. We do it because the holy Spirit of God *invites* us to. It’s something we do because, deep down in our heart and soul, we truly *want* to.

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