

Fruit of the Spirit
Kindness in a Time of Polarization
July 3, 2022

Good Morning. If I have not met you before, my name is Michael. I'm one of the pastors from our Lexington church.

And if I have met you before... let me go ahead and address the elephant in the room. Yes, this is, in fact, what my chin looks like. I know it's been years since some of you have seen it... it's been years since I have seen it. But, I hope it blesses you as much as it blesses me.

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This week in our fruit of the Spirit series, we're covering the fruit of kindness. To help us unpack it, we're gonna look at a few places, but primarily in **Ephesians 4:30-5:1**. Feel free to go ahead and turn there as I set us up a little bit.

In 2020, the world was taken by storm by a fictional Midwestern football coach on Apple TV named Ted Lasso.

Jason Sudeikis played a character that the world fell in love with. A football-turned-soccer coach who overcomes the odds not merely by his wits or his strength - as we expect lead characters to do - but rather by disarming people with kindness.

He was this strange character who chose to see people for who they really were. A guy who didn't use people... or move people out of his way to get to his own personal goals... but took time to really see those around him, getting to know their stories, their struggles, their pain, and then act in ways - small and large - to care for them.

- From things like biscuits with the boss every morning where he'd bring his difficult boss going through a messy divorce a sweet treat every morning to check in with her... or by recognizing that one his players had terrible father and it impacted the entire way he played the game and related to the team, so he willingly steps in to do the things and say the things to him that his father never did... all the way to forgiving the very people who set out from the beginning to see him fail.

And popular culture just could not get enough. Ted Lasso won all kinds of awards and acclaim. Harvard's daily paper even called his impact on pop culture: ***"Ted Lasso and the Kindness Revolution."***

And I think that's a fitting assessment. Kindness has become an increasingly popular concept in our culture. Now, that's not necessarily because we're good at embodying it. I would actually argue that we're not. But, I think that's precisely why it is so attractive... because we sort of collectively sense our need for it.

So much of our news feeds, and sound bites tend to make us feel that the world is, quite frankly, a harsh, cruel, polarizing, and altogether unkind country... whose capital city is Twitter.

I've seen bumper stickers recently calling us to "make America kind again". And signs posted up in people's yards exclaiming, "Kindness is everything."

And the point being, it's like when we see kindness displayed in our cultural moment, it's like it's a breath of fresh air to the soul, where we go, "That... .Yes, that... the world just needs more of that."

And I don't think it's a stretch to argue that when we're told the fruit of God's Spirit in us is kindness, that in our cultural moment, perhaps, we too, as followers of Jesus are meant to be that kind of refreshing.

And that's a bit of what I hope to help us step into this morning...

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So let's pick up in **Ephesians 4:30-5:1**

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. **31** Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. So, all the ways our flesh might respond to people, especially difficult people, in our life. Put those things away **32** Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. **1** Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

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So, first, what does this text tell us about what it means to be kind?

So, if you look again at 4:32 and 5:1. **32** Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. **1** Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

It's important to remember that when the Scriptures were written they weren't written with chapters and verses. Those were later additions. So, though these two thoughts are the end and beginning of two chapters, we're actually supposed to see here the logical connection between the two.

The instruction "to be kind" is connected to the one that calls us to "imitate God." The logical conclusion being - **we are to be kind because God, himself, is kind. To say it another way: The basis for kindness is God.**

In fact, God is the kindest being in all of creation... and our kindness is meant to imitate his.

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Now, depending on where you're coming from that statement might hit you in a variety of different ways.

For some of you, you may come from backgrounds or church experiences where the God who was taught to you seemed like anything but kind.

He was a God constantly on the lookout for any excuse to send you to hell - not a God who delighted in you, or sought above all to show you mercy... but was ready and waiting for you to slip up so he could give you what you deserve...

And so for you to hear that God is the kindest being in all creation... to you sounds like a cruel joke.

But, the problem with that view of God... is the Bible... that over and over again tells us that he is “merciful and abundant in steadfast love... showing it to the thousandth generation... and that “His mercy and goodness will me all the days of my life.”

Others of us, on the other hand, make an equal, yet opposite error.

We sort of handpick other passages in the Bible, like the ones that tend to land on a coffee mug or in a frame in our house... and we sort of cultivate a type of God that is so “kind” that He doesn’t rustle any feathers. A God who would never say anything that would challenge us or rub us the wrong way.

A God whose kindness is just sort of devolved in spiritual platitudes that makes us feel good. “He’s my shepherd who leads me beside still waters...” and we just kind of ignore the next line about his rod and his staff.

And the problem with this depiction of God’s kindness is... also... the Bible.

The kindness of God is bigger and more beautiful than both of these caricatures... and, if we want to understand what it means for us to walk in biblical kindness, we can’t cherry-pick some passages that do or don’t sit well with us - we have to take all of Scripture into consideration... because you can’t separate the kindness of God from the rest of God.

- You can’t separate the kindness of God from the love of God - those attributes work in harmony together.
- And pressing that further, you can’t separate the kindness of God from the holiness and the truth of God.

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What does God's kindness look like? The answer is actually very simple: Jesus. God demonstrates his kindness to us in and through Jesus.

I love the way Paul says it elsewhere in **Titus 3**

[4] But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, [5] he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, [6] whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, [7] so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Jesus is the appearance of God's kindness in the world, and if we want to understand how the kindness of God operates... we need to look no further than him...

- This Jesus who comes with **compassion towards the sick and diseased**. Who reaches out in kindness to touch and heal the leper... bringing dignity and worth and honor to those cast aside in society.
- Jesus who in kindness **gives of himself to the broken and the needy**, the hurting and forgotten.
- And Jesus, who in his kindness, **wouldn't even let the Pharisees and religious elite remain in the dark** - believing that their outward righteousness was enough to save them.
- Jesus **who spoke up to show them the error of their ways** that they too might be recipients of God's mercy. Jesus **who called all of the above to repent**. Jesus who was willing to call sin, sin and to tell people - even if it rustled their jimmies - that they needed saving.
 - Ex. Similar to how it's unkind to let your roommate go on a date with smelly breath or food on their face, it's unkind to let those who need salvation believe they don't.

And above all, Jesus, who through God's kindness gave us what we don't deserve - forgiveness of our sin. Who paid what we owed.

Though we were, as the Scriptures say, God's enemies in our sin... and, do deserve the just consequence of that rebellion... God displays his kindness toward us by not treating us that way... by instead dying the death for sin that we deserved to forgive us and make us something new.

The kindness of God does not shy away from the hard truth, but mercifully reaches out to us in it.

Or as one pastor I read said... **"God's kindness is His love in action."**

And here's why I bring all of that up... **for one, we have to get rid of all these false understandings of what God is like**. God is kind... kinder to us than we could even imagine. And we don't need to erase or sand down any of His edges to see that... in fact, those things only show us in greater measure just how kind God truly is.

I love that the passage uses the term "tender-hearted". It means "easily moved to love and compassion." And I can't help but think that some of us need to hear that is how God is towards us this morning.

Some of you, I know, **believe that God's disposition towards you isn't one that's easily moved to love**... but I would encourage you to look to Jesus and see just how wrong you are!

And unless we see Him this way - unless we see Him for all the beauty of His kindness and mercy towards us in Jesus, we'll never be motivated to become a people who embody this kindness ourselves.

But, for two, I bring it up to also get rid of all these false understandings we may have of kindness, too.

You see, we often confuse kindness for other things... such as **niceness or passivity**. Like being kind is as simple as smiling and being polite... or refusing to do or say something because somebody else might not want to hear it.

But, that's not kindness... Like **Romans 2:4 says...** God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance. God's kindness is anything but passive. God's kindness has a goal.

God intentionally **ACTED** on his kindness by sending Jesus to the world. To meet us where we are... to reach out to us in our deepest need and pain... to forgive us and heal us...

And, in so doing, this Jesus, who was full of the loving kindness of God, was willing to at times say and do the hard things that people didn't always want, but desperately needed.

And the fruit of God's Spirit in us is that we might become a people who are much of the same.

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Now all of that sounds well and good doesn't it? Yes, God is kind. And, yes, as His people, it would be good for us and the world to embody it... but... how?

- How could it be possible to become a person of kindness in a world and in a moment, where everyone wants us to see and treat the person on the other side of the aisle as the absolute scum and villainy ruining the world?
- How can we become people of kindness, when bare minimum, it seems we are simply surrounded by people who are so different from us, who frustrate or annoy us, or simply just make things more difficult for us than they need to be?

Like Ted Lasso is great... but he's fake... how can we have refreshing kindness towards the very real difficult people who inhabit our real difficult lives?

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This was actually the very question the Ephesian church was asking, too.

You see, the church was composed of two groups of people who were formerly at total odds with each other: the Greeks and the Jews. And much of the aim of this letter is, in a lot of ways, for the people in the church to learn to get along with one another.

Like, I want you to think about any polarized groups in our culture - which shouldn't be hard - people who are at odds with each other - who seem like there's no feasible way they could get along. That is a similar dynamic between Jews and Gentiles, namely the Greeks.

- The Jewish people generally saw Greeks as “the heathen.” They were unholy. Lived detestably and enemies of God.
- The Greco-Roman Gentiles, on the other hand, saw the Jews as **this little backwoods religious sect**. With strange beliefs and practices. An obstinate people who would not get with the times... and, in many areas, a cancerous tumor to the Roman Empire.

Not to mention, during the time of Roman occupation, many Jewish communities were seen as second class citizens, so from class, to race, lifestyle, religion - Jews and Gentiles were at complete opposite ends of the spectrum. Jews and Greeks alike would look on each other with a degree of disdain for the others behaviors, beliefs and practices.

And now, in the providential love and grace of God, they’ve all become Christians and are a part of the same church together.

And the question naturally arises... how can this possibly work? Because on the surface, it all seems like a ticking time bomb for this little church family.

But in chapter 2, he hits them with this...

Ephesians 2:13–16 [13] But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [14] For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility [15] by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, [16] and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Do you see? What does he say breaks down their division? Breaks down their hostility? The story of the gospel... He reminds them that at the end of the day... **they share a common story.**

He doesn’t say “Ok guys, you need to get along, so let’s talk about politics and race and lets all get on the same page with that,” rather what he does is begins by sharing **with them a common story.**

He tells them *this* is the thing that now enables you to be okay with one another. This is what can actually unites over and above all of your differences. All the things that you believed should divide you, cause friction between you, and make you mistreat one another... all of that has been torn down.

You share more in common than you ever though possible...

Such that when he gets to verse 32... and says... **32** Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ forgave you*

It’s the only thing that feasibly makes sense.

If the truest story of their life - the thing that really gave them worth or salvation - was actually all the things that could divide them... then they should hold those things against one another... because those divisions would be ultimately the most important.

Their backgrounds, their identity markers, their political affiliation, their status... those would be things to fight over, to look down on others for, or mistreat others because of...

But the biblical story is something deeper and truer and because of that, they have a common story and a common humanity. And when you see that, that enables you to be kind. Because you realize, underneath it all, you're in the just about the same boat as everyone else.

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And the growth of kindness in your life is dependent on the same - **By recognizing that you share a common story with those around you.**

You see, believe it or not, you have a common story with every single person you encounter...

Regardless of who they are, where they're from, what side of the aisle they fall on, or whatever... You have a common story with every colleague at your job, every classmate next to you... your spouse, every member of your Lifegroup, every child you have, every boss, every politician, every pastor... and even every troll on Twitter....

Everyone you encounter is a person who needs kindness of God just like you... and learning to see that is how God's kindness will grow in you, too.

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So when the world tells you, **you have to pick a team and demonize those on the other side...** the fruit of the Spirit stops that dead in its tracks and recognizes that everyone is an Image Bearer of God - just like you.

- So no matter where one stands on a given topic or issue - they are a person that is worthy of dignity, value, and love.

When the world **wants you to fit into their story and says, "You're either for us or against us"** on any number of things, the fruit of the Spirit refuses to think like that, and instead, **chooses the better story that says, "I'm always for you... even when I disagree."** Who sees that we're all in this together... we've all be impacted by sin.

- They have their own issues they're personally dealing with, just like you.
- They have grouchy days waking up on the wrong side of the bed, just like you

In a world of 24/7 news AND social media hot takes AND cancel culture **where you make one false step and your life is totally blown up with no hope of redemption**, the fruit of the Spirit is able to see the common story that every human being is caught up in and we can step towards forgiveness and reconciliation.

When the world wants you to **define yourself and others by a relationship status**, or your the type of job one has, or how you voted recently, or your sexual orientation, the fruit of the Spirit sees the common humanity in everyone and responds accordingly

- They need to experience the life-reviving news of Jesus, just like you
- They need grace and understanding, just like you
- They need someone to befriend them and love them and tell them in Jesus there is life and they ought to repent, just like you.

You see, **Spirit-led kindness humanizes rather than demonizes**. It chooses to see the whole and true story of a person and respond in kind.

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I love the way **Jackie Hill Perry** talks about it. She says, “There is a kindness that only the Spirit of God can produce in us. It goes beyond being nice and cordial. It’s more miraculous than a forced smile. Beyond our natural ability to construct... kindness reminds the world of God and how Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God’s kindness towards us. He gave Him without our asking. The benevolent God models this still. When we do the same, we help folks imagine what heaven is like.”

That is what we are invited into. **Helping others imagine heaven.**

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So, for a moment, I want you to think about the people or the person in your life really grates on you... a person who it is most difficult for you to be kind to... perhaps because they are unkind to you...

- Maybe it's someone you know who believes virtually everything you disagree with and is loud about it.
- Or maybe it's a family member who is draining for you in every way imaginable.
- Or maybe it's a coworker or a boss who gets on your nerves and is critical of you around others.
- Or that person in your LifeGroup who annoys you and always seems to say something that makes you wanna roll your eyes. Every group has one... and if your group doesn't... there's something you need to know...
- Or maybe its the person who's sinned against you.

When it comes to these people, we can choose to respond in one of three ways:

For one, you can respond by withholding in your relationship. You can internally stew over how deeply you disagree or dislike them - as you resolve in your heart that you can't possibly get along with the other because of what they've done or what they believe.

So you cut them off from any sort of relationship, and maybe you bottle that up and keep it to yourself - growing in bitterness and frustration - perhaps you may disclose it to others so that you can form your own little team to be against the person.

You can make them the enemy. The villain. The demon. **This is polarization.**

Or you can take the more subtle route. You can be nice.

You can respond by perhaps ignoring it, or pushing it down within you. So you inwardly acknowledge that things are off, but you still smile when they show up, and engage in small talk, yet still allow a relational elephant in the room. And over time things grow cold and distant. **This leads to bitterness.**

For what it's worth... these are how the rest of the world responds... and, as we said at the top, we can see where that has gotten us.

Or you can allow the Spirit of God to move you to kindness. You can ask the Spirit to remind you of your common story... that you each need Jesus... and allow that to cause you to move towards them in love and mercy.

- To see them for the person they really are.
- To choose to build togetherness and love in situations that could be explosive.
- To bless them with good in the very places that bitterness and ill will could flourish
- To help them in their need.
- To speak the truth to them in love.
- To offer a helping hand and a healing touch. To show them a glimpse of heaven... even if they would never respond the same.

And not only would that change your life... but, it might just change theirs, as well... and enable them to see that another world is not only possible... but on its way.

And if that sounds absolutely impossible and difficult, on our own it totally is... but, ***the good news is we are not on our own.***

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Now, to end our time, I just want to share a small story with you because I imagine the question that we might be tempted to ask, “Can this actually work in real life? Like, aren't we past a time when kindness can actually change anything? Isn't our society too far gone?” It can easily feel like any kindness we show is but a drop in an ocean of harshness, cruelty and polarization...

It's the story of a woman named Rosaria Butterfield. She's a pretty famous author now, but in her book, “The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert” she chronicles the story of her conversion - from a devout postmodern lesbian professor to a devout evangelical Christian. About the biggest transformation you could imagine.

At one point in her career, before becoming a Christian she wrote a rather scathing critique of a group of Christian men, of which she received an enormous volume of polarized responses. And she says, at one point, she placed an empty box in each corner of her desk, she sorted hate mail into one and fan mail into the other.

Then she received a two-page response from a local pastor. “It was a kind and inquiring letter,” she says. It had a warmth and civility to it, in addition to its probing questions. [and I LOVE these next couple of sentences: She couldn’t figure out which box to put the letter in, so it sat on her desk for seven days. [it was like she couldn't fit it in the niceness box or the polarization box] “It was the kindest letter of opposition that I had ever received.” Its tone demonstrated that the writer wasn’t against her.

Eventually, she contacted the pastor and became friends with him and his wife. “They talked with me in a way that didn’t make me feel erased.” Their friendship was an important part of her journey to faith.

For Rosaria, what changed the trajectory of her life was interacting with kind Christians. People who loved her enough to reach out to her, to open up their home to her, to share meals with her ongoingly for weeks and weeks and weeks.

And people who loved her enough to share their convictions. To reach out to her and ask her questions, and to say winsomely, “I love you, you’re my friend, and because I love you you have to know I disagree with you and this is not what Jesus wants for you.”

And for Rosaria that blew up her categories of what she thought a Christian was supposed to be. It’s like “Whoa you know me and you’re not treating me like I’m an enemy? And you’re telling me I need to repent and you also want to be my friend? What’s going on?”

What moved her from a place of polarization to a place of wanting to follow Jesus was the up close and personal interactions of Christians who exuding kindness.

And at the time, I’m sure Rosaria didn’t know it at all - but she was actually seeing glimpses of heaven through them.

So I don’t know who God has placed in your life, and I don’t know how difficult it is. But I do know that you are invited to imitate God there...

- And if God in His infinite depths of mercy showed you such radical grace by disrupting your life, then by His Spirit you can do that for others
- And if God, who sent His very Son into the world to sacrifice and forgive you of all of your sin and failings and mess-ups - then by His Spirit you can do that for others
- And if God in his radical kindness led you to repentance, then by His Spirit you can do that for others

And my hope is - like Rosaria seeing that letter - people will see how you interact and know what you believe - and will have no idea what box to put you in because you’re demonstrating kindness that is so supernaturally powerful.

And in a world drowning in bitterness and rage and anger, you just might be the very breath of fresh air that person needs.

Pray

Father, We pray that you would work these things into us.

Mold and make us to be a people who are kind as you are kind in the midst of a world that feels like it is anything but.

God we thank you that you truly are the kindness being there ever was and the glaring proof of that to us is Jesus.

Thank you for the kindness you have shown us in Him. Though we deserve the due consequence of sin, you have brought us forgiveness and new life.

God, I pray that would motivate us to show the same type of kindness to those in our life who would test it.

*In Jesus name,
Amen*

Communion

As is our practice, during this next song the tables for Communion will be open. This is a meal believers in Jesus share together when we gather that reminds us of the kindness of God.

How Jesus' body - represented by the bread - was broken for us to purchase our forgiveness. How his blood - represented by the wine - was given to give us the promise of new life.

If you're a believer in Jesus, you're invited to come and take it.

Also, if you need prayer, of any shape or kind, our prayer team is available.

Let's stand and sing.