

“THE FRUITFUL LIFE ”

6. Kindness

Ephesians 4:17 – 5:1

That great son of Lichfield, Dr Samuel Johnson, was, as I’m sure we all know, a great wit and an extremely erudite person. He was quick with a put-down, and he didn’t always suffer fools gladly. But he was also a pretty devout Christian whose prayers are still used today in some parts of the Church. That faith meant that, although he could be very quick-witted and sharp-tongued, he wasn’t malicious with it and he tried to avoid gossip and slander. It was in conversations over meals that his intellect was most often seen to sparkle and on one occasion his biographer Boswell, whose statue stands at the other end of the Market Square from Johnson’s, asked the great man what was really the point of dining with others if no-one said anything very interesting or memorable. Johnson replied that the point was “*to eat and drink together and to promote kindness.*” **Kindness** is the next aspect of the “*Fruit of the Spirit*” that we are to reflect on together this morning.

If you’ve been coming along here regularly for the last few weeks you will recall that we are looking at what Paul has to say in chapter 5 of his *Letter to the Galatians* about the way in which those who claim to follow Jesus should behave. He writes about the various “*acts of the sinful nature*” – the things we find ourselves doing as a result of our immersion in a world perverted and distorted from its original goodness by the presence of evil – and says that we should follow Jesus in walking the way of the Holy Spirit, filled with and influenced by the Spirit of God himself. If we do that, our lives will display what he calls “*the fruit of the Spirit*”, this package of qualities that should mark us off as people who are genuinely being transformed by Jesus as a result of his death and resurrection. So far we have considered what it means to cultivate **love, joy, peace** and **patience**.

Now we are onto **kindness**, which is often linked to **goodness**, the next aspect of this fruit which we’ll consider next time we look at this list. In fact, the links between **kindness** and **goodness** are so close that the same Greek word is often translated by either of those English words in our Bibles. We’ll look a bit more closely at what the difference is between them when we talk about **goodness** next month. This morning let’s just concentrate on the first one.

The Greek word, as we’ve mentioned it, is *chrestotes*. It’s not a terribly commonly used word in Ancient Greek, but when it was used it usually meant something along the lines of morally good and honourable, a capacity to be good to everyone and anyone. Plutarch writes that it is something wider than simply justice: there is a generosity and a lack of partiality in it. In another context completely, it was used to describe a good wine, with a suggestion of mellowness about it. Kindness is not harsh or bitter – it is smooth and soothing. Indeed, if you look at Jesus’ words in *Matthew 11:29,30* – a familiar saying to

many of us – he invites his followers to *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is **easy** and my burden is light.”* The word translated *“easy”* there is this same word in Greek. It is comfortable, doesn’t chafe or scratch; it fits well.

So what are we to make of this in terms of our Christian life, then? What will **kindness** look like when it is being shown in our behaviour? It’s all very well talking about these qualities, but they need to make a positive difference if we are to be the people God wants us to be. In many ways, this particular characteristic is at the very heart of our faith and it relates to some of the things we’ve already spoken about in this list of “segments” of the *“fruit of the Spirit”*. First and foremost, this is a direct outworking of the first quality on the list, **love**. Remember that this **love** is *“agape”*, a sacrificial and active love – not simply a feeling or an emotion. **Kindness** is what helps put some of the flesh on that **love**. In his great chapter on **love**, to which we referred last time – *1 Corinthians 13* – Paul says that **love** is not only **patient**, but also **kind** (*1 Corinthians 13:4*). He writes about it as being not envious, proud or boastful, but protecting, trusting, persevering.

This is a quality that looks outwards, not inwards. **Kindness** is most definitely not a self-centred or self-directed quality. In fact, it cannot function without someone or something to be kind to. That is emphasised here in what Paul writes to the Ephesians, in the passage from which we’ve just heard. He said that we are to be *“kind and compassionate **to one another**”*. There is a mutuality in it. It is an expression of corporate love. In that sense it is the direct opposite of what he writes about in the previous verse: *“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.”* If you are wanting to cultivate **kindness** as part of the *“fruit of the Spirit”*, then it cannot share with any of those expressions of sinful human behaviour.

And where this all comes from – in this, as in so many other expressions of our transformed lives as people who take Jesus and his teaching seriously – is an attempt to imitate God himself. As human beings made in the image of our Creator, we should be allowing ourselves to be changed from within by God’s Holy Spirit who enables us to display these qualities. That is also made very clear in this context, as Paul continues: *“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”* Our lives should be a reflection of the God whom we worship and seek to follow, the God of whom Paul writes earlier in this letter: *“God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.”* As God showed his **kindness** to us in the life, death and

resurrection of his Son Jesus, so we should be showing that **kindness** to all whom we encounter. As someone once wrote, *“The right kind of heart is a kind heart like God’s”*.

In other words, this **kindness** should be integral to our lives, an inseparable part of the way in which we react and respond to others. Wherever we are and whatever we’re doing, there will be opportunities for displaying this – in the way we speak to others, in the way we act towards others, in the ways in which we subordinate our desires to the needs of others – whoever they are. I’ve no idea where this quotation comes from, but it seems to make sense: *“Always judge a person by the way they treat someone who can be of no possible use to them.”* This sort of **kindness** is indiscriminate, reaching out to all others in all kinds of situations. The Roman philosopher Seneca – not a Christian – wrote that *“Wherever there is a human being there is an opportunity for kindness”* – a kind word, a gracious act, a generous provision. As Aesop – again not a Christian – wrote: *“No act of kindness, however small, is wasted.”*

There are some people who like to commit those small acts, *“random acts of kindness”*, small favours which touch the lives of others quite indiscriminately and anonymously – buying a meal for a homeless person, paying for two cups of coffee so that another person doesn’t have to, even just smiling and saying “Hello” to the person you pass on the way to the supermarket or the gym each day.

And just like the *“agape”* love we talked about, this isn’t simply a feeling, an emotion that we have no control over: this is the result of a conscious decision. Dr Johnson again: *“Kindness is in our power even when fondness is not”*. You can choose to be kind, to reach out, to show your love for others. Just as God made a deliberate choice to love you and then demonstrated it through the gift of his Son, so you can choose to be kind to others. (Just as you can choose **not** to be kind to anyone, if you want.) Gradually that will become more natural for you. You’ll get used to it and find yourself being kind far more readily. (And if you choose not to, you’ll gradually get grumpier and less likeable along with it.)

As with the other aspects of the *“fruit of the Spirit”*, once you have decided that you need this as part of your Christian experience – or, rather, **accepted** that you need it – you can pray to God for help in cultivating it and then work at practising it. It might not come easily to start with and you may find yourself having to make a real effort – but it will be worth it in the end. Maybe we could practise amongst ourselves for a bit before unleashing this **kindness** on an unsuspecting world! Try it over coffee afterwards! And as you do so, remember, as one anonymous writer put it: *“Be kind to unkind people – they need it the most.”*

“Be kind to one another ... Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.”

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And where this all comes from – in this, as in so many other expressions of our transformed lives as people who take Jesus and his teaching seriously – is an attempt to imitate God himself. As human beings made in the image of our Creator, we should be allowing ourselves to be changed from within by God's Holy Spirit who enables us to display these qualities. That is also made very clear in this context, as Paul continues in *Ephesians 5:1*. Our lives should be a reflection of the God whom we worship and seek to follow (look at *Ephesians 2:6,7*).

In other words, this **kindness** should be integral to our lives, an inseparable part of the way in which we react and respond to others. Wherever we are and whatever we're doing, there will be opportunities for displaying this – in the way we speak to others, in the way we act towards others, in the ways in which we subordinate our desires to the needs of others – whoever they are. There are some people who like to commit those small acts, "*random acts of kindness*". And just like the "*agape*" love we talked about, this isn't simply a feeling, an emotion that we have no control over: this is the result of a conscious decision. You can choose to be kind, to reach out, to show your love for others. Just as God made a deliberate choice to love you and then demonstrated it through the gift of his Son, so you can choose to be kind to others.

Questions for discussion

- 1) What do you understand by **kindness**? Have you ever been shown real kindness?
- 2) How can we best show kindness to one another within the Christian community?
- 3) Isn't being kind to rough sleepers and the like simply pandering to them? Why/why not?
- 4) What do you think about "*random acts of kindness*"? What's the point of them? Have you ever done any?
- 5) What are you going to do about this aspect of the "*fruit of the Spirit*"?