

The Park Road Pulpit

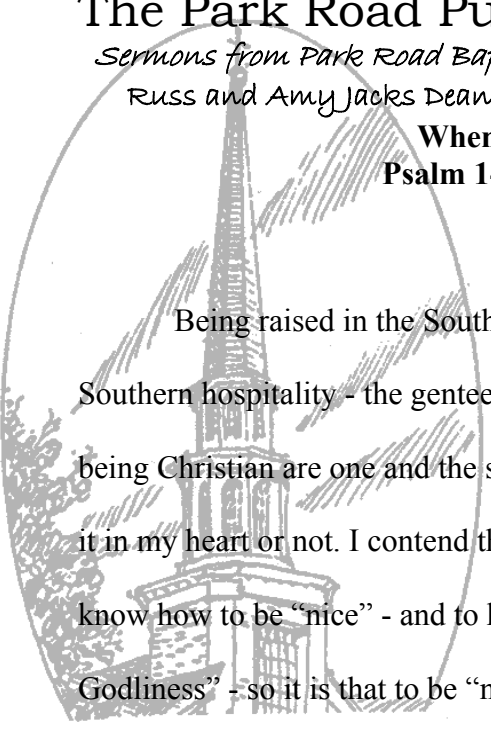
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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**When Being “Nice” Is Not Enough
Psalm 145.10-18 and Ephesians 4.25-5.2**

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Being raised in the South, I know how to do. What I mean is, I know all about Southern hospitality - the genteel way of my world - where being “Raised Right” and being Christian are one and the same. I know all about how to be “nice” - whether I mean it in my heart or not. I contend that you can’t be raised in the South as a woman and not know how to be “nice” - and to know that just as surely as “cleanliness is next to Godliness” - so it is that to be “nice” is next to being Christian - even if on the inside you are not feeling or thinking “nice.” All that matters is the external. Surely you must know what I’m talking about. It is epitomized by what I’ll call the “Bless Her Heart” Syndrome. You know, that’s the way you can say anything you want about someone as long as you preface it with “Bless Her Heart.” All kind of slander is “Christianized” by that one simple phrase. You can rip someone up - tear them apart, chew them up and spit them out, behind their backs of course, and with that one small phrase “Bless His Heart” - all is well with the world. It’s a way to be “nice” and culturally Christian, while not letting kindness seep into your soul.

Another good tool for this is the sharing of prayer concerns. This has to the all-time best way to spread gossip in the name of intercessory prayer. It’s “nice,” but often not kind.

In bumper-to-bumper traffic, when you need to inch over 3 lanes in order to make your exit, you secretly pray for some “nice” person to let you in and you know, in your heart of hearts, that they must be Christian if they do.

When you mutter, just under your breath where only the person sitting next to you can hear your derogatory comment - that’s being “nice” because you didn’t say it out loud. But it’s not being kind. It’s certainly not the way of Jesus - so to associate being “nice” and being Christian is simply hypocrisy at it’s best, and it’s one of the most valid critiques of the faith.

Being “nice” is never enough. We have confused being “nice” for being Christian. And we have used the words nice and kind interchangeably. Being “nice” is surface-talk. The Fruit of the Spirit that is kindness runs much deeper. In Bonnie Thurston’s brief work on the Fruit of the Spirit, she says that “‘Being nice’ and ‘being Christian’ are so often mistakenly equated. Personally, I’ve never like the word ‘nice,’ as its Old French root means ‘stupid,’ and its Latin root means ‘ignorant.’ . . . Many people do think that ‘being Christian’ means that one must be ‘nice,’ that is, agreeable, pleasant, thoughtful, well mannered, the sort of person who wouldn’t upset the social status quo; the sort of person who knows which fork to use in a good restaurant; the sort of person who is acceptable in, well, ‘nice’ company.” (page 23)

Sometimes people feel that our preaching is over their heads. Sometimes people feel that our preaching is too ideal. Sometimes people feel that our preaching is too theological or theoretical. Sometimes people feel that our preaching is too political. Well, today, fear not: this sermon is simple and for everyone - myself included. But never confuse simple for easy. Practicing the fruit of kindness may be one of our more difficult

tasks in being a follower of Jesus. We probably all know how to be “nice,” but do we know how to live out kindness that is of God? “Nice” is not enough.

Jesus’ actions were always more than nice: Washing the disciples feet had nothing to do with following any etiquette code. Taking the form of a servant, Jesus enacted kindness. It would have been “nice” to instruct the slave of the house to do this job, while muttering nice teachings about the greatest among them would be the least. But Jesus lived out kindness - his life was not about social acceptability - his life was about truth at any cost. (John 13) It was socially unacceptable for Jesus to lower himself to such a task. Washing dirty feet was certainly beneath Jesus - so thought Peter! But the act went way beyond niceties. It was an act of kindness for Jesus to become servant to his followers. Actions do speak louder than words.

When the woman was caught in adultery and everyone had their stones ready to throw, it would have been “nice” for Jesus to urge the people to reconsider. But rather he posed a question to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And then while he doodled in the sand, they one by one walked away, and finally when Jesus was alone with her, he asked, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one,” she said. “Neither do I condemn you,” he said, and he meant it - deep down in his soul - he meant it. Nice would never have been enough. Only the Fruit of the Spirit that is kindness is enough. (John 8) A word of unconditional love. A word of forgiveness. A word that lifts shame is our calling.

Jesus’ stories and teachings were always more than “nice”: Who could forget the story of the Prodigal Son? “Nice” would have been for the father to allow the wayward son back into his good graces - letting time be the healing balm. But instead,

even while the son was still at a distance, the father ran to him, put his arms around him and kissed him. The father threw a grand party - bringing out the best robe, a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. They killed the fatted calf, and they did celebrate. The father was not fair, nor nice. "Nice" would never have been enough. Kind is what he was. Kindness always runs much deeper. (Luke 15)

And of course there is the story of the Good Samaritan. It would have been nice of anyone in the story to go for help, or at the very least, put the injured man on a prayer list. But the most least likely person - the Samaritan - bandaged him up, put him on his own animal, took him to an inn and nursed him and paid for all of his expenses. "Nice" would never have been enough. It was kindness that took over, and in the telling of that story, Jesus called us to a higher way of living - expanding our understanding of who our neighbor really is. Often the least likely among us.

It is thought that the letter we have to the church at Ephesus, reportedly penned by Paul, was actually a circular letter - not addressed to one church in need of a good word, but rather to many churches (even ours!) Our text for today is a part of the concluding ethical exhortation in Ephesians, and it stresses "unity in the church, love as an imitation of God, and separation from impurity." (The New Oxford Annotated Bible) "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love." (Ephesians 4.31-5.2)

This is our true calling - imitators of God. I don't know about you, but those are frightening words. And being "nice" will not be enough to even get us by. This is a matter of the heart.

When you hear a joke that is slanderous, derogatory and you don't agree, it's "nice" to keep your mouth shut, but it would be kind to speak the truth on behalf of whatever minority or oppressed group is being humiliated. The truth is that there is no humor in degrading other human beings. That is just one simple example of when keeping silent may be "nice," but it is certainly not kind. Often the kind thing to do is to speak up - offering a different way, another perspective that better represents the way of Jesus.

And of course, the reverse is true - and is probably more often the case - that we would do well to keep our mouths shut, in the name of the fruit of kindness, to not add another word of negativism or criticism or gossip or slander.

Offering forgiveness to someone who has wronged you. Going the extra mile to help someone in need. Letting go of our judgemental way. Being observant - noticing when someone is in pain and stopping your busy life long enough to listen - really listen - when someone just needs to talk.

Kindness runs much deeper than "nice." Bonnie Thurston tells this modern-day parable of kindness:

A very young family had struggled through the diagnosis of cancer with their small daughter. The child was about five years old and had endured many surgeries, many treatments, and chemotherapy that had left her bald. But her prognosis was good, and the family decided to go out to dinner to celebrate. They didn't choose an elegant

restaurant, but they chose a good one. Of course, they were worried about how people would react to their active, cheerful, bald daughter. They thought a better class of people, nicer people, might be found in a better restaurant. You know, people less likely to stare. So they dressed up and went out for their party.

It was a good choice of restaurant, subdued, slightly darkened, pleasant. The hostess didn't bat an eye as she seated the family. The waiter brought the menus, rattled off the specials and didn't stare. [Everyone was being "nice."] The family chose their dinners. The bread and salads appeared and then . . . yes, you guessed it, the little girl had to go to the restroom. Most of us have faced it, the long walk across the dining room with a child in tow. So the mother got up with the daughter. The very attractive, even elegant lady at the next table smiled kindly as they passed.

Off they went to the ladies' room, and they accomplished the business at hand. But as they were leaving the restroom, the lady from the next table came in. She knelt down by the little bald girl and said, "You've had cancer, haven't you?" "Oh, no," thought the child's mother, "now what?" and she prepared to go into her protective mode (you know it, mothers, the Protective Mode.) But the elegant lady continued, "me, too. And I'm bald, too." At which point she removed her hairdo and plopped it down on the little girl's head. The child was delighted. She raced to the full-length mirror as the two older women grinned and told her how lovely she looked. The women had a conversation about cancer and recovery while the little girl giggled delightedly and played with the wig. After a time, they all returned to their tables. The elegant lady winked at her escort and resumed her dinner.

But the little girl couldn't wait to tell her Dad what had happened and how grown up she looked in the wig. And before her mother could either explain or stop her, she had slipped off her chair, hopped over to the elegant lady's table and asked, "may I borrow your hair to show my Dad?"

Picture it now . . . The nice restaurant. The attractive clientele. The elegant lady and her escort. "May I borrow your hair to show my Dad?" And as the little girl's horrified mother looked on, the elegant lady took off her lovely wig and placed it carefully on the little girl's head. "Go show your Daddy, sweetheart". . . This wasn't just "nice" [this was kindness] even when it is costly. (Fruit of the Spirit, Bonnie Thurston, pages 24-26)

Social etiquette and niceties should never be confused for the Fruit of the Spirit that is kindness. The goodness that is of God, that runs deep in us, must be lived out. The best of who we are should surface, and laying aside all external expectations, we should say what is right, act what is true, live - truly live - what is known as kindness. Be imitators of God. Kindness should be our best word and our only action. And if you don't believe that Kindness will take lots of practice, then just listen to yourself and watch yourself. Even as I have written these words, I have had to offer my own confessions to God, for all the times and ways that I have not practiced what I preach. Even this morning. Oh, I'm almost always "nice," because I was Raised Right, but often I have not been kind. And there is a difference. Being "nice" is not enough. We will have to reach much deeper to imitate God.

Bonnie Thurston concludes her story this way: Greater love has no elegant woman than this: that she take off her hair for an anonymous little bald girl." (page 26)

May it be so.