

KINDNESS

Dr. Jim Grier is the Distinguished Professor of Philosophical Theology at Cornerstone University and Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. I had the privilege of taking a class from him called *Ethical Issues In Contemporary Ministry*.

In class Dr. Grier invited us to call him “Jim.” Since it was doctoral level work, he wanted our relationship to be collegial. I couldn’t. Calling him “Jim” would have been something like calling my Grandma Cumings by her first name: “Ethyl.” He was always Dr. Grier.

Several things stand out about Dr. Grier. First is his towering intellect. He has a massive grasp of contemporary ethical issues, and vast reservoir of biblical and philosophical information right at his fingertips. I recently got to hear him preach again and it was amazing. He draws effortlessly upon deep wells of knowledge that have been thoroughly assimilated and integrated in his mind.

And with that great mind is an even greater spirit. Dr. Grier is one of the gentlest men I have ever known. He never used his intelligence to intimidate or shame us in class. His conversations about those with whom he disagreed politically or theologically was always respectful. Even when he corrected us, we never felt attacked.

One of the ethical issues we talked about in class was homosexuality. Dr. Grier told us about his work as a hospice chaplain in an AIDS ward. He shared his attempts to minister to an angry young man dying of AIDS who had been rejected by his minister father. This patient had been so traumatized by his Christian past that turned his hatred on Dr. Grier. He even spit on him. Dr. Grier spoke with tears in his eyes about his efforts to love that man for Christ’s sake, even though that love was never reciprocated.

To me, Dr. Grier is a living, breathing illustration of the uncommon virtue of kindness.

Kindness is, perhaps, an odd addition to our list. Few people think of themselves as unkind. But not being unkind is not the same as being kind.

The Bible describes kindness as a mark of Christ-followers. For instance, When Paul wrote the Church in Colossae, he urged: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, *kindness*, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12).

In the great description of how love conducts itself, kindness was near the top of the list: “Love is patient, love is kind...” (1 Corinthians 13:4).

And kindness, as described in Scripture, is a mark of God’s presence in our lives by the indwelling Spirit: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, *kindness*, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22-23). Those who are filled with the Spirit of the living God have Christ formed in them. They express God’s character, and a piece of that is kindness.

For example, the coming of Jesus to bring salvation is called an expression of “...the kindness and love of God our Savior...” (Titus 3:4). And last week we read about becoming “...sons of the Most High, because he is *kind* to the ungrateful and wicked...” (Luke 6:35). Being kind is acting like God, expressing God’s life through our own.

Like all virtues, kindness has a counterfeit, a weak sister for which we sometimes settle. It’s a counterfeit deeply ingrained in the Midwestern culture. Around here we sometimes refer to

it as “Michigan nice.” We make nice to each other and call it kindness.

Nice is a wonderful word and a terrible word. It’s a word that suffers too much from character anemia. Nice can be the pleasant veneer we paste over our annoyances in order to maintain appearances; in order not to rock the boat. It is a thin smile stretched over clenched teeth. Nice is not saying what we feel—until later.

Biblical kindness has none of that weakness. It is a positive grace that radiates goodness and generosity.

Kindness shows itself in two overlapping strains of conduct. The first is a cluster of behaviors that make us feel safe, liked. This is kindness as gentleness, courtesy, consideration, friendliness. In some respects, it’s easier to describe this by identifying what it is not.

For instance, my Grandpa Cumings was an invalid when I became old enough to know him. He had suffered a debilitating stroke that suppressed the gentler parts of his personality. He had become severe, bitter, harsh. I can remember walking into my grandparents’ living room and having Grandpa Cumings fix his stern gaze on me. It would become so uncomfortable I would find some excuse to leave.

Grandpa Cumings’ stroke left him kindness impaired. He wasn’t a safe man to be around. He wasn’t physically abuse, and he rarely talked. But he was no longer kind.

Tragically, as we all know, Christ-followers have a reputation for being unsafe, unkind. A common stereotype of conservative Christians paints us as meanspirited, nasty. It isn’t entirely fair, because so many who follow Jesus are kind in ways the media—and thus the general public—never sees. We all get tagged because some aggressively and publically take their unkindness to the streets.

They are unkind to those with whom they disagree politically. Many of us have deep convictions about significant issues. And we are blessed with the freedom in America to speak openly and persuasively about those convictions. We can and should participate in the political process.

As citizens of Christ’s Kingdom, we are obligated to engage that process with kindness and respect. When we do not, we reflect badly on our Lord Jesus.

For instance, I was dismayed to see one man shouting down his congressman at a political rally—clutching his Bible.

For instance, we have a relative who forwards emails that are frequently vicious, scandalous, libelous. They are character assassinations. They are filled with half-truths and untruths.

Is it possible to voice our political discontent and disagreement in ways that reflect well on Jesus?

Some Christians have been outspoken and unkind to those we consider moral lepers. Jesus scandalized the religious establishment of his day by going to dinners and parties with “tax collectors and sinners.” These were the moral outcasts of his day—the Bernie Madoff’s, the sexual libertines. Jesus showed them kindness without ever compromising his holiness or his moral convictions. He could talk to them about God without treating them like dirt.

Kindness.

There is a second aspect to kindness derived from its root meaning. Kindness is safe. Kindness is also goodness wrapped in usefulness. It is compassionate generosity. Kindness is goodness doing good.

This afternoon the Blessings Team is sponsoring a Birthday Party at the Interfaith Shelter.

They are hosting this event for all the children whose birthdays are in August and whose parents can't afford a proper celebration. Today's party is a beta test for future monthly events. There will be games, presents, pizza, and a cake with candles.

That's kindness in action. It is mercy and compassion wrapped in usefulness and generosity.

We rightly talk about our public face as Christians and the unkindness that people sometimes see. That matters. But we are sometimes least kind at home. Home is where we feel free not to make nice—not to pretend that things are OK. Home is where we get used to each other and where our truest character is exposed.

One of our members sent me an email with a quote from a study book she is reading. It reads: "Who you are at home is who you are." Home is where the masks come off.

What if we asked our kids to grade us on our kindness? What if we asked our brothers and sisters? Would they describe us as kind? Are we safe? Gracious? Considerate? Are we helpful?

The great Baptist preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon once said: "A good character is the best tombstone. Those who loved you and were helped by you will remember you when forget-me-nots have withered. Carve your name on hearts, not on marble." Will your family remember you for the kindness you engraved on their hearts?

What if the people around us where we live, work and play graded us on our kindness. For instance, the waitress who served a meal that was cold? Is it possible to complain kindly? Or the cop who wrote us up for some traffic infraction? What about the clerk responding to our complaint about their company's service or product?

Would the neighbor kids describe you as kind? How about your co-workers? Or the kids you go to school with?

If we claim to follow Jesus, kindness matters. "Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness..."

Being kind doesn't mean we can't be assertive. And it doesn't mean we never become angry or take forceful action. Jesus took a whip to some people who were systematically violating the holiness of God's house, turning a place of prayer into a market known for corruption and dishonesty.

We have one problem Jesus didn't have. Our anger usually gets too much mixed up with our own selfish desires and longings. And we don't always know enough of the whole story to act with justice.

But sometimes we do, and when we do, it is unkind not to act: to restrain violence and evil. To protect our families and others.

It's not the exceptions we need to worry about, however. It's the rule: "...clothe yourselves with...*kindness*."

If you want to be uncommonly kind, and if kindness is a fruit of the Spirit, then kindness begins in our walk with Jesus. The Bible says: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Becoming kind means reflecting the Lord's glory—looking at Jesus so we can act like Jesus. It takes time seeing Jesus in the pages of the Bible and letting the Holy Spirit renovate our hearts with what we see.

Let me suggest a little prayer exercise for this week. First thing, when you wake up in the morning, pray this: "Lord, make me kind." And then when the kids come down for breakfast,

pray: "Lord, make me kind."

When you drive into the parking lot at school or work, pray again: "Lord, make me kind."

When you start the car, as you buckle your seat belt: "Lord, make me kind."

When you get home at the end of a long day: "Lord, make me kind."

You get the idea. Let's begin now. Would you pray with me: "Lord, make me kind."