

# Now Is the Time for Love:

## Love is Kind

1 Corinthians 13:4

Sunday, January 16, 2005

In an old Jewish story entitled “If Not Higher,” a small village’s beloved rabbi disappeared every Friday morning. Unable to find him anywhere, the devoted villagers boasted that their rabbi actually ascended into heaven. One day, however, a newcomer to their small village heard the stories and merely scoffed. “People don’t ascend to heaven,” he mocked. “I’ll tell you where your rabbi really goes on Friday mornings.” So on the next Friday morning the newcomer crept into the woods by the rabbi’s house. He quietly watched the rabbi rise, say his prayers and, much to his surprise, dress in the clothes of a common peasant. The rabbi walked into the woods, chopped down a small tree and then cut it into firewood. Still following at a safe distance, the newcomer saw the rabbi carry a bundle of wood to a shack in the poorest section of the village. There, an old woman and her sick son gladly received the bundle of wood for the coming week. They thanked the anonymous woodsman, unaware that it was the rabbi in disguise. Deeply moved by the rabbi’s secret goodness, the newcomer became his disciple. And whenever he heard the villagers say, “On Friday mornings our rabbi ascends all the way to heaven,” the newcomer would quietly add, “If not higher.”

Virtues are often displayed best through stories<sup>1</sup>, and in this story, we see a beautiful picture of what the Bible calls kindness.<sup>2</sup> The Greek word for kindness is *chrestotes*, and as we’ll see it’s a word that sometimes got confused with the Greek word for Christ – *Christos*. The Hebrew word (*Chesed*) often translated as “kindness” is a rich and deep word. It suggests much more than being nice or helpful; it suggests ideas of loyalty, steadfast love, devotion, commitment. In the Old Testament it was often connected with the goodness of God – see the refrain “O, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love (*Chesed*) endures forever.” So it is a rich word with nuanced meanings, but in almost every time it appears in the Old Testament (at least in the NIV) it is either preceded with or followed by the word “shown.” In other words, kindness is something you show or demonstrate. You may not always see patience, but you can’t miss kindness. It’s not just an inner attitude or a state of mind; it’s an action. You show it and others see it. It is the empirical side of love.

We display kindness because God has displayed kindness to us in Christ. All throughout the story of the Bible we watch God’s kindness towards all of his creatures. We already mentioned the Hebrew word *Chesed* (see Psalm 145:8 mercy = *chesed*). Jesus talked about the kindness of God, especially emphasizing the radical generosity of God’s kindness - “God is kind to the ungrateful and wicked” (Luke 6:35). “Your Father in heaven causes the sun to rise on the good and the evil ...” (Matthew 5:45). God isn’t

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<sup>1</sup> If you want to read more on the power of stories in teaching us how to live a Christ-like life see **The Healing Power of Stories** by Daniel Taylor and **Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right from Wrong** by William Kilpatrick.

<sup>2</sup> For a beautiful biblical story of kindness that prefigures the Gospel, read 2 Samuel Chapter 9.

merely kind to those who “deserve” kindness. God the Father operates out of grace. Ephesians 2 is a rich passage about the kindness of God. Paul tells the story of God’s saving grace made known to us in Christ: even when we were spiritually dead because of our sin, “God who is rich in mercy, made us alive together in Christ ... in order that in the ages to come he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness towards us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:2, 7). Kindness flows from grace – because we didn’t earn it or deserve it. In spite of what people do, God continues to display kindness. But Romans 2:4 tells us that there is a aim or a goal to God’s kindness – speaking of God’s patience, Paul wrote, “Or do you show contempt for the riches of God’s kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you towards repentance” (Romans 2:4). In other words, God’s kindness should change our outlook on life. God is kind because it is part of His nature to be kind; but the kindness of God – think of all the way God has been kind to you – should soften and break our heart, opening our lives to God.

So because God has been kind to us, we’re told to walk in love as God loved us (Ephesians 5:1-2). Part of walking in love involves being kind as God is kind. Jesus said, “If anyone gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...” (Matthew 10:42). Kindness is bringing a cup of cold water to someone. The NT writer James put it this way, “Religion (or we might say spirituality) that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress ...” (James 1:27). Kindness is taking care of vulnerable people. Paul asked for kindness while he was in prison when he wrote to his friend Timothy – “When you come bring the cloak that at I left with Carpus ... and my scrolls and parchment” (see 2 Timothy 4:12). Kindness is bringing prisoners or the ill a warm coat or a good book.

Kindness is observable love, practical love, earthy love, a “cup of cold water” love. It is the helpful side of love. People aren’t kind because they think kind thoughts; they are kind because they do something, they perform deeds of kindness. Over the past few weeks we’ve heard or watched hundreds of examples of kindness in Southeast Asia in the aftermath of one of the worst disasters we’ve ever seen.

Kindness is often quiet, small, unspectacular and unassuming, but don’t ever think that kindness is wimpy or sweet or soft. It has power, guts, and tenacity. It’s powerful enough to change families and communities. Superglue is small but it’s powerful. In the same way, kindness is the superglue of the spiritual realm: it holds communities and families and marriages and churches together – “as God’s chosen people, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, KINDNESS, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12). Here’s where Nietzsche had it wrong. The German philosopher looked at the Christian world and said that Christian spirituality strips the strong of their power, encouraging us to be weak and insipid with passionless virtues like kindness and meekness. If only we could rid the world of Christianity, he argued, then we could pave the way for a race of supermen. Based on the dull Christianity of his day, Nietzsche had a point. But true kindness, true Christ-like kindness is tough, gutsy, courageous, creative and assertive. Kindness requires action. Kindness moves into a problem and tackles it – even at great cost and risk to oneself. Think of Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark he touched

and healed a leper, a paralytic and a man with a deformed hand – and it cost him. See Mark 3:6 → “Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”

By the way, there is perhaps no greater contemporary example of the power, the tenacity, and the courage of Christ-like kindness than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I’ve said that kindness is the helpful, practical side of love, but are there times when we just shouldn’t be that helpful? Yes. You see, as C.S. Lewis observed, kindness, all by itself, doesn’t really care if someone becomes a better person; it just wants to be helpful and help others escape suffering.<sup>3</sup> In other words, if we only focus on being kind and helpful, our love may grow soft, flabby, and ultimately unloving. Love is not always just helpful or nice in every situation. For instance, would it be loving for an 18 year old girl to have sex with her boyfriend because he really needs it and she can help him? No. Is it love to call in sick for a spouse with a massive hangover – for the 4<sup>th</sup> time this month? No. Is it love to ignore a crude, racially offensive remark from a family member or co-worker? No. Is it loving to allow a member of our body at TVC to live in blatant sin? No. Love has a tough side to it. Love confronts sin, evil and injustice.

So how do we confront sin and disorder in the church, the body of Christ, and yet remain kind? The Bible clearly tells us we can confront and be kind. Listen to this verse: “Brothers (and sisters), if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you may also be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). First, we don’t ignore it. We go to the person. We go directly. We don’t go to someone else. And we don’t do it gently because we’re profoundly aware of our brokenness and vulnerability to sin. If you don’t do it that way, Paul says you’re not a “spiritual person.” In other words, you’re acting out of spiritual immaturity. Is it kind to ignore sin? No. Is it kind to talk to someone else about that person’s problems? No. Is it kind to go with an angry, arrogant, judgmental spirit? No. And yet, this is perhaps the hardest things for people to do in the church. Let me remind us of God’s vision for the church: we are brothers and sisters in God’s family; we are bricks in the same building; we are members, parts, of the same body. In our relationships we are to reflect the love that God as within the members of the Trinity; we are to reflect the love that Jesus displayed in his life, death and resurrection. So if we’re not willing to go directly to a brother or sister in Christ in a kind spirit of gentleness and humility, then our spiritual life is probably more disordered than our brother’s spiritual life.

Let me apply kindness on two levels – inside the church family and outside the church family.

**1) Kindness inside the church, the body of Christ** → One of the most profound gifts God has given us is each other. Sadly, rather than viewing you as someone whom God has placed here for a purpose, with a specific set of gifts that God ordained for the completion of the body, I only see your defects, weaknesses, faults, and mistakes. Then other people become a threat, a menace, a hassle, and a barrier. But what is the most

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<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis in **The Problem of Pain**.

profound image for the church in the New Testament? Simply this: we are the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). We are members of one another and God has put us together with the right gifts for the right time “just as He determines” (1 Corinthians 12:11).

Unfortunately, the church in Corinth wasn't displaying kindness. For example, in chapter 8:1 like a bunch of pompous windbags the church members were declaring, “Yes, we all have knowledge.” They took great pride in their intellectual superiority. Now, this isn't an indictment on academic achievement or higher education or even intellectual achievement. Paul was simply warning that knowledge really is power and power can make you feel powerful and superior. And then you can develop an arrogant, cruel and condescending spirit: “We're so smart, we're so intellectual, we're so advanced, and we're so unlike all those dumb people who don't have as much class as we do. Yea we got smarts, yes we do, we got smarts how about you?” Paul said, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” In this sense, knowledge tears people down. But love is better because it always builds up (8:2).

Kindness begins with us – treating one another with kindness. If we don't do that, we're sunk. We might as well close up shop and read the NY Times on Sunday morning. I'm glad to say that although we're certainly not perfect, there is still a lot of kindness flowing around this place called TVC. Listen to the story of one young woman in our church family who wrote me during the past week:

*Dear Pastor Matt,*

*Thank you very much for allowing me to express to you and everyone what I feel in my heart and yet know it would take a life time if not eternity to say. Thank you.*

*I am pleased to let you all know that I have been bathed and strengthened by your acts of kindness. As I pen this note to you the Lord has placed before me the verse: “The joy of the Lord is my strength.” I can't help but believe that your acts of kindness have given me the sheer joy which has been my strength.*

*For all who do not know what this body of believers has done, I would like to share their multiple acts of kindness with you. On a snowy evening before my surgery the elders of our church responded to a call I had made just that morning. (Remember the verse in James 5:14-15 NIV. “When I am sick, I will call the elders of the church to pray over me and anoint me with oil in the name of the Lord and the prayer offered in faith will make me well; the Lord will raise me up.”*

*Well...without hesitation they met with Peter and I and prayed that prayer over me. After surgery many families responded with delicious and nourishing meals, cards and phone calls that reminded me of God's love. And most of all, there was still and still is your prayers.*

*Before I conclude, I know I will never have the privileged opportunity to let each one of you know how your prayers have reached the ears of our Lord. All I can say is that the peace that surpasses all understanding has been*

*mine ever since I was told that I have breast cancer. I praise God for you and I love you with all my heart. Thank you.*

*Love, Loraine Conroy*

How do we practice kindness with one another in our church family? First, as I already said, if we have concerns about someone, we can go to that person directly in a spirit of humility, gentleness and deep personal brokenness. Second, as Loraine experienced, we can do very practical things for one another – pray for one another, bring a meal ...

Third, and very powerfully, we can offer a rare and precious gift in our busy, fragmented world – the gift of listening. Listening is a profound act of kindness. Listening is one of the most Christ-like acts of kindness that we can give to people. Can you remember the last time you actually gave someone the gift of time – when you said and conveyed with your body language and your eye contact, “You go ahead and talk. I won’t interrupt. I won’t judge your thoughts. I won’t defend myself or argue my case. I will be the presence of Christ to you and I will listen.”

This kind of deep, heart listening may require what our ancient brothers and sisters in Christ called *statio*. *Statio* means stopping one thing before starting another. So, for instance, if I come home and start going through the mail while I ask my wife, “So how was your day? Tell me, I’m most interested” I’m not practicing *statio*. *Statio* means that I stop looking at the mail, look at my wife, and wait until she’s done. In other words, you can’t listen and multi-task. You can hear someone; but you can’t listen to someone. Do you want to practice kindness? Learn to listen to others. Give your family members, your small group members, your neighbor, your co-worker, your fellow-students, your brother or sister in Christ the gift of *statio*. That is love in action.

**2) Kindness outside the church walls** → According to Jesus, one sign of authentic spirituality is this: Do we confine kindness inside our walls or does it seep all over the place outside of our walls. The Bible never says, “You wait until you practice kindness perfectly inside the church walls and then you can start thinking about reaching out.” Nor do we say, “We’ll be kind to people in our tribe or our club – i.e. people who think like us or dress like us or are educated like we are or who vote like us or listen to our kinds of music. God’s kindness isn’t tribal or clubby. Jesus said, “Your Father in heaven causes the sun to rise on the good and the evil, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). The story of the Gospel says that in spite of what people deserve God has responded with kindness, the kindness we see dramatically displayed at the cross. So Jesus said that if we’re only kind to those belong to our club, we’re not any different than any other club on the face of the earth.

**Illustration:** Twenty years ago a man named Steve Sjorgen started a new church in Cincinnati with a simple plan to reach their community. They called it servant evangelism, which simply meant that they would not only tell people about Jesus but that they would display the kindness of God before a watching and sometimes skeptical world. They defined servant evangelism as “demonstrating the kindness of God by offering to do some act of humble service with no strings attached.” So as they spoke the

Good News, they also displayed the Good News of God by giving away light bulbs, offering free water on hot days, and hot chocolate on cold days, handing stamps out on April 15<sup>th</sup>, washing cars, even scrubbing toilets of local businesses. Their motto is simple: “Small things done with great love will change the world.” As we’ve seen, that’s a very “Jesusy” strategy. We like it so much that if you’re in a small group at TVC, we hope in the next year you’ll have an opportunity to plan your own servant evangelism project.

As I mentioned the Greek word for kindness was chrestotes; the Greek word for Christ is Christos. In the first few hundred years of Christianity we have historical records indicating that this confused some people. They thought Christians (Christos people) were really the chrestotes people, the kind ones. Does that describe us? Certainly, we can’t remove all of the uncomfortable parts to the Good News of Jesus Christ, but even so, do people think of us as kind?