

## The Fruit of the Spirit: Being Imitators of God in Kindness Luke 6:27-36 & 2 Samuel 9:1-7

We're continuing our series on the fruit of the spirit, and today's fruit is kindness.

### **Luke 6:27-36**

<sup>27</sup>“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you, <sup>28</sup>bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup>If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. <sup>30</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup>Do to others as you would have them do to you.

<sup>32</sup>“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup>If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup>If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. <sup>35</sup>But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for your Father is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. <sup>36</sup>Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

On the surface, kindness seems like a very simple & straightforward topic. Maybe boring. Perhaps even weak. “Be kind.” “Do good.” At the least, “Don’t be a jerk!” But kindness isn’t boring at all. Or weak. It’s surprisingly startling. And kindness actually requires great strength, because the biblical word kindness,

which is the word “chrestos,” is defined as “love towards those who are unkind.”

As I explained last week, all the fruit of the spirit flow out of love, and kindness is one of those. And that’s why it’s defined this way: It’s love toward those who are unkind, or as we heard in our first reading, love shown to enemies, to the ungrateful. Kindness may be defined as love expressed to those who don’t deserve it, or who at least we think in our minds don’t deserve it. Kindness towards those who deserve it, or whom we already love, Jesus tells us, is not actually really kindness. It’s basic human instincts at work. You know, we naturally love our family (those we get along with at least), we naturally love our friends (our good friends), we naturally love those who are good to us. And as we heard again in our first reading from Luke 6, Jesus said that if we love those who love us, or do good to those who do good to us, what’s the big deal about that? That’s easy, and everyone does it. Kindness, rather, is love expressed toward those who don’t deserve it, yet who need it. That’s what kindness is. In Romans 2 Chapter 4, the apostle Paul says that it’s the kindness of God that leads people to repentance. It’s the kindness of God that leads people to repentance, which means kindness isn’t shown exclusively to people who deserve it, but to those who need it. Even our commonly used phrase “Kill them with kindness,” assumes that the person we’re extending kindness to is someone we would like

to...well...kill. We're just doing it with kindness. Now parenthetically, kindness, as it appears in the bible, almost always follows patience. There's a great logic to this list in the fruit of the spirit and in the other lists. Kindness follows patience in the list of the fruit of the spirit, and it follows patience in the list in 1 Corinthians 13, the great love chapter, where Paul says "Love is patient, love is kind." In 2 Timothy 2 when Paul is giving a list of qualifications for church leaders, he says a leader must not be quarrelsome, but kind to everyone, and patient. So patience and kindness there again go together. Which is why one commentator defined chrestos/kindness as "the ability to act for the welfare of those who are taxing your patience." So there's something about kindness that flows from patience, when we can slow ourselves down like we talked about last week and take time to think clearly and not just react. That is, when we can be long-tempered and exercise patience, we'll be more apt to act with kindness to people that we have a difficult time loving. Now given this understanding of kindness then -- as love expressed to the undeserving or those who are difficult for us to love -- as a fruit of the spirit kindness is something we need to pray for help with, because it is something that probably does not come naturally to us. Therefore, it must be a fruit of the spirit in our lives and not just something we try and muster up enough willpower to do because we're supposed to. We simply can't muster up that

strength on our own. We need to pray for it, remembering that everything that Jesus teaches us to do he also supplies the strength to carry out. Yet it's something that, as we walk with Jesus and learn from Jesus, and as the character of Christ is formed in us and we practice it with His help, kindness becomes a little bit more reflexive over time because of the spirit of Christ at work in us.

Now, on to our reading from 2 Samuel. I need to set the scene here, and tell you who the main characters are, so that the reading will make sense. First is Saul. Saul was the first king of Israel, who started off pretty well and then struggled in his leadership role, especially as young David began to rise up. Saul swore that he would kill David. He was very jealous of David and he swore that he would kill him and twice tried to do so by picking up a spear and chucking it at him to try and pin him to a wall. Saul became so enraged and obsessed with David that he pursued him for years. And David fled to the wilderness and had to remain on the run. So that's Saul. Then there's Jonathan. Jonathan is Saul's son and David's longest-time and closest friend. They were so close that they made a covenant together. Their friendship was like a brotherhood. Remember back when we talked about love, we talked about "phileo," a phileo-type love? That is a brotherly love, and that was what David and Jonathan had to the max. But they had that friendship under the radar screen, so Saul, Jonathan's dad, wouldn't

know. Then third, there's Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth was crippled from age five. And he was crippled because word had gotten back to the palace that both Saul and Jonathan had been killed in battle by the Philistines. Everyone panicked and began to flee, knowing that the Philistines were ruthless and would be storming the gates of Saul's palace, and the Philistines showed no mercy whatsoever to their enemies. So all of the servants began to flee and to run. Mephibosheth's nurse picked him up in her arms and began to run, but along the way tripped and fell, and in the course of falling and hitting the ground, broke both of Mephibosheth's ankles, which were then set hastily and very badly. So he ended up being crippled from childhood on. Now add to that the fact that because Mephibosheth was part of Saul's family, and David was seen by Saul's family as an enemy, Mephibosheth grew up hearing stories about David which cast him as the scapegoat and the villain – the bad guy. So in a way, Mephibosheth grew up believing that he is crippled because of David, even if David was not at fault and did not directly cause Saul's death or Jonathan's death, or his handicap. Add on top of that the fact that being a crippled person in those days meant you were an outcast. Young men were needed for military service and for work and to procreate and to extend the family line and to build the kingdom of Israel and all that. Being a handicapped person prevented him from being able

to function as a normal man in that society. And it didn't matter if your handicap was an accident or not; you were seen as an outcast and you were treated that way. So now, to further set the scene, a few years later as a young adult, Mephibosheth receives word that David, who is now the king of Israel after Mephibosheth's grandfather Saul, wants to see him and wants him brought to the king's palace. In those days that could only mean one thing: as the last surviving descendent of Saul, he was going to be executed, because that's what they did in those days. In order to prevent vengeance or insurrection on the part of the defeated king's relatives, any surviving family member had to be exterminated. So you can imagine what Mephibosheth is thinking and feeling as he is brought to Jerusalem on a donkey accompanied by David's servants. He's anticipating his doom. But here's what actually happens:

## **2 Samuel 9:1-7**

<sup>9</sup>David asked, "Is there anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" <sup>2</sup>Now there was a servant of the house of Saul whose name was Ziba, and he was summoned to David. The king said to him, "Are you Ziba?" And he said, "At your service!" <sup>3</sup>The king said, "Is there anyone remaining in the house of Saul to whom I may show the kindness of God?" Ziba said to the king, "There remains a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in his feet." <sup>4</sup>The king said to him, "Where is he?" Ziba said to the king, "He is in the house of Machir son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar." <sup>5</sup>Then King David sent and brought him from the house of Machir son of Ammiel, at Lo-debar. <sup>6</sup>Mephibosheth[a] son of Jonathan son of Saul came to David, and fell on his face and did

obedience. David said, "Mephibosheth!" He answered, "I am your servant." <sup>7</sup>David said to him, "Do not be afraid, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan; I will restore to you all the land of your grandfather Saul, and you yourself shall eat at my table always."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Well let's talk about kindness. What can we learn about kindness from this story? There are several things, and along the way I'm going to be connecting dots from David to Jesus, because this story is anticipatory of the ministry of Jesus. It's really a pre-gospel narrative. There are five reflections here, five points (so this sermon will not be pointless!). Five points here.

The first is this: David initiated this kindness. He was not reacting to an event or something; he was not responding to a request. David took time to think: To whom can I show kindness? So there's a thoughtfulness here, a mindfulness of the other, not a reaction to the other. David could have rested on his laurels following Saul's death when he took his place as king over Israel. He could have gone out & expanded some territory, held victory celebrations, had a military parade, or even gloated. But he chose instead to ponder the good that he could do, to show kindness to Saul's family. And when we look at the ministry of Jesus, he consistently showed this initiative. He didn't wait for people to come to him. He itinerated. He went about prayerfully and thoughtfully, showing kindness to

everyone. He didn't discriminate – you know, this person deserves it, that person doesn't.

Which leads to the second observation here: reflection. David's kindness is shown to someone who would have been considered an enemy. When David asks, "Is there anyone else from Saul's household to whom I can show kindness?" what he's really saying is, "Is there anyone left from the enemy camp that I can love?" Notice David didn't say "Who of all the people who stuck by me and were loyal to me and helped me while Saul was persecuting me can I now love?" I'm sure David showed appreciation for *their* loyalty, but his main concern now is to show kindness to someone from his enemy's household. This is so revolutionary, so groundbreaking, so different, given that most kings at that time (and probably throughout history), most top leaders like that, usually wiped out their enemies so that they could secure full control and authority without the possibility of a revolt. That's why all the assassinations happened at times like that over the years. It removes all possible threats. And again, this foreshadows the ministry of Jesus. This is the gospel in the Old Testament. The grace of kindness is shown to an enemy throughout Jesus' life and especially as he goes to his death.

Third: David's first word to Mephibosheth is his name. He's treated as a person. He isn't one of "those people from Saul's household." He's not labeled.

His name is used seven times in this story as a way of emphasizing that David's intention was to treat him honorably as a human being who had an identity and a name. He is addressed personally. Again, this is gospel. It's a hallmark of Jesus' ministry, although it's easily missed. Read through the gospels and notice that everyone Jesus encountered he either called by name or he called them friend, including those who made his life difficult. Jesus never labeled anyone. A great example of this is in Luke's gospel when Jesus, itinerating through Jericho, finds Zacchaeus up in the tree. Here is a man who is an enemy of the people. He's a tax collector – a traitor – to the Jews. And Jesus picked him out of the crowd, called him by name, and then goes to his house. Now there are several elements of that Zacchaeus story that mirror the Mephibosheth story. But it's important to notice that Jesus initiated the kindness with Zacchaeus and called him by name.

Zacchaeus is treated as a human being and not as one of "those tax collectors," the way they were labeled by the people. And by the way, it's important for us to be aware of ourselves and the way that we label people: "those people" from that ethnic group, "those people" from that other religion, or "those people" who have a different political ideology, or whatever. Not every person within a certain group is the same. People have names. They have identities. Everyone needs and deserves to be seen as a human being and not just all lumped together.

So, quick summary: What we learned so far is that kindness is about relationship -- not just "do-goodism," but relationship -- as much as that is possible. So kindness takes initiative, it is shown to those who tax our patience, and kindness calls people by name. Kindness is about relationship, as much as that is possible. And I must note that even though the first word out of David's mouth is Mephibosheth's name, the next words out of his mouth are "Don't be afraid." Fear not. And as you've heard from me over and over again over the years, this is Jesus' most oft-repeated phrase. Talk about foreshadowing the gospel! Fear not!

Fourth: David's kindness had substance. David restored all of his family's land. And Mephibosheth ate at the king's table all of his days. Read the rest of 2 Samuel chapter 9 to see an explanation of this. But David's kindness was not, say, a Hallmark greeting card sentiment. This kindness was extravagant. It was generous. And David's words "Eat at my table" is a way of saying, again, "Be in relationship with me and my household." You know, those words are practically eucharistic in their overtones. And David expected nothing in return. His kindness didn't have strings attached. It didn't have conditions. He wasn't kissing up or trying to win favors. And again, there are gospel overtones to this. In Jesus' teaching this morning that we heard from Luke 6, he says to give, expecting

nothing in return. And I sometimes wonder if Jesus, as he gave this whole “love-your-enemies” teaching, was thinking of David and this particular story. So David’s kindness had substance.

And then fifth: David’s kindness changed Mephibosheth. We read later in 2 Samuel 16 that David’s son Absalom rebels against him. He gathers a band of unsavory characters around him and David once again has to flee (and that’s a whole other story). And Mephibosheth has an opportunity to betray David and rebel with Absalom. But to make a long story short, Mephibosheth stays loyal to David and later tells David that he would have fled with him and fought with him had he had the opportunity and the physical ability. So David’s kindness changed Mephibosheth. And that’s what kindness will do. Again, going back to Romans 2:4, it’s the kindness of God that leads to repentance. Not the judgment of God that leads to repentance, or the punishment of God that leads to repentance, or a lecture from God about how bad we are and how messed we are that will lead us to repentance, but the kindness of God. Kindness changes people. So we don’t *kill* people with kindness, we *bless* them with kindness. We honor them. We offer them the possibility of being changed and transformed just like we hopefully have been changed and transformed by kindness. Jesus says God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. And somehow we are to imitate that behavior. Paul

says in Ephesians 5:1 “Be imitators of God as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” Because that’s how people can be changed. Again, Jesus commands us to show kindness to the ungrateful and the wicked not because he approves of their behavior and wants us to, but because it provides an opportunity for them to experience God’s love just like we have experienced God’s love and to be changed. It reveals God the Father’s heart and it becomes a witness whether or not they respond positively to it. How they respond to our kindness is not our responsibility. Our responsibility is to be kind and to be generous and to let God settle the outcome and do the transforming work. But it’s really the only way to provide an opportunity for someone to be changed. Now, going back to Jesus’ teaching in Luke 6, when he talks about loving enemies, the question will inevitably arise, “Who’s my enemy?” That’s a great question. It seems pretty clear from the scripture that when Jesus talks about loving an enemy and showing kindness to the ungrateful and the wicked, he assumes it’s someone that we have human contact with or have the ability to have contact with. Yes, there are enemies of the state, for example, or people far away. But for the sake of initiating kindness, and doing it to someone who taxes our patience, we’re talking about someone that we have contact with or have the ability to have contact with. And it needs to be said that sometimes

someone that we believe is an enemy isn't really an enemy at all. In our imaginations we make them into an enemy because we make all kinds of assumptions without interacting with them – without relationship. And that's another reason why initiating kindness is so important, and not labeling people. Because when we can take the time to interact with someone who taxes our patience, and maybe try to build a relationship with them in some way, we may discover that they aren't as horrible as we thought they were. Or maybe they are that horrible. Love 'em anyway! It's the Jesus thing to do. I have a friend who has a quote underneath her email signature. Many of you probably have this too: You type an email and there's an email signature underneath with your name on it, and some people have some quotes underneath their email signature. And her email signature says this: "It's better to be kind than right." And she says that because she knows that kindness will sometimes reveal that the person we are showing kindness to is probably not as awful as we think they are. Showing kindness may reveal that we have prejudices and opinions that may not have been right. Sometimes fear dictates our thoughts and actions more than faith, so it's better to be kind than to be right. Because we may also use our "rightness" as a weapon in an unkind way even when we're wrong, if you know what I mean.

And when all is said and done, would we rather be known as people who are right all the time, or as people who are kind?

Now this morning before I close, I want to lead us in a prayer for our world and our country. At the end of the prayer we'll say the Lord's Prayer together:

Gracious God of love, we're grateful that you have revealed yourself to us. Each of us loved by you as children. Each of us precious in your sight. Each of us a reflection of you. Each of us bound together by love, which is in fact your presence among us, for you are love. We come to you, God, weary and carrying heavy burdens. Some of us bear the yoke of illness. Some of us bear the yoke of loss and grief. Some of us bear the yoke of unemployment or underemployment. Some of us bear the yoke of hunger or homelessness. Some bear the yoke of depression. Some bear the yoke of addiction. Some bear the yoke of loneliness. From these and so many other yokes, dear God, we pray for rest, we pray for healing, we pray for release, we pray for wholeness and peace and joy. We also recognize that our nation bears many burdens. We cannot seem to find ways to work together for the common good. We allow the least among us to suffer and languish. We fixate on what divides us rather than on what brings us together as people and as human beings. So remind us of our calling. Remind us that all people are created equal. God of all life, may peace and justice fill our land and

indeed the whole world. And as we pray for our nation this morning, we pray for peace and relief from the tension and violence in places around the globe where people are victimized, where safety is threatened, where freedoms are denied, where life is treated as anything less than sacred. We pray for and bless in Jesus' name our medical workers, doctors, nurses, researchers trying to come up with both a cure and a vaccine for the Coronavirus. We thank you for them. Bless them, God, with strength and endurance. Gracious God, grant us the yoke of Christ, binding us together, tethered by your love, guided by your presence, bringing your kingdom into this world. It is for this kingdom that we now pray, using the words Jesus taught us, saying....

Our Father, who art in Heaven....