

Modern-day Proverbs sermon series

Be Nice When You Can, But Always Be Kind – Col. 3:12-17

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In prepping for this sermon series, I wanted to generate a robust list of modern-day proverbs so I'd have plenty to choose from. So, I turned to one of my favorite references, which people have been using for centuries when they needed information: Facebook. I posted a request back in November asking for some modern-day sayings that should be in the Bible and got 99 responses. Really, one more of you couldn't have shared your thought and gotten me to triple digits?

I received all kinds of interesting responses. Some of them were funny, like "Don't let the door hit ya on the way out" and "Don't be a jerk," although a more colorful word than "jerk" was used. Others were beautifully colloquial, like "Your bulldog can beat my skunk, but you still have to go away with the stink." I don't quite know what that means, but I give thanks to Andrea Nielsen for sharing it. Some were deep, like "To be old and wise you first have to be young and stupid," and "When people show you who you are, believe them."

Today's proverb comes from that list, from a minister friend of mine in Missouri. "Be nice when you can, but always be kind." I had never heard this before, but I was intrigued by it, because initially I didn't know there was much of a difference between being nice and being kind. Turns out, there is, especially when viewed through a spiritual lens. Here's how I know: The word "kind" appears in the Bible 188 times. The word "nice" appears in the Bible 0 times. So what's the difference?

I once worked with a minister who was incredibly friendly with everyone with whom they interacted. They smiled, listened, offered feedback, said the right thing. I would describe them as exceedingly nice. Then, one day, I overheard them talking to a colleague, absolutely tearing down a church member with whom they'd just had a conversation. During the conversation with that member, they were nice. In talking about them afterwards, however, they were not kind.

So, what does it mean to be nice? Dictionary.com defines nice as "pleasing, agreeable, delightful." Nothing wrong with that, right? I'd love to be thought of that way. Let me be clear in saying that being nice is a good thing. The proverb doesn't say "don't be nice," it says, "be nice when you can." That implies that there are situations in which you can't be nice. I've you've driven on New Circle Road at rush hour or received 13 "scam likely" calls in 10 minutes, you understand what I'm saying. It may not always be possible to be nice.

It's interesting to note that the word "nice" derives from the Latin "nescius," which means "ignorant." Why is that relevant? Well, compare that with the Germanic root of the word "kind," which is also the root for the word "kin," as in family. What that says to me is you that can be nice to someone without ever feeling a real connection or kinship, which would make it OK to talk smack about them behind their back. If I'm not connected to someone, being nice requires no investment, I can remain ignorant about who they are as a person. I can smile at them or say "Please" and "Thank you," which is good to do, but there's not a connection there. When someone says, "Oh, he was just being nice," it implies a superficiality.

Just being nice also has the potential to be self-serving. Sometimes, we may only be nice when someone else is watching. One author wrote, "The nice person will help pick up trash after a long night — but only if someone is watching so they can get the credit. In its worst form, this

ignorance leads us to believe we are deeply good people doing good for the world when we are primarily doing good for ourselves.” Ouch. That wasn’t very nice.

There are also times when being nice isn’t the right response. If someone we know is being mistreated, if a person is verbally attacking someone else, then as people of faith our response shouldn’t be nice. We should be able to call people out when they are denigrating the image of God in another person. Sometimes we choose to be nice to save face or avoid confrontation, which may enable an addiction or give tacit approval to a destructive behavior. It’s not always the right thing to be nice.

But, as the proverb notes, we can always be kind. What’s the difference? Kindness recognized your connection to the other person at a deeper level, acknowledging that the other person deserves to be treated with respect. Kindness treats the other person as you would want to be treated. Kindness is, at its root, other-oriented. When I practice kindness, I am doing what I feel is best for the other person, which might include saying “no” to them for their own well-being or calling out their prejudice. That’s not a very nice thing to do, but it is kind.

Kindness also involves a level of self-sacrifice and involvement that moves beyond niceness. I was in line at a fast-food restaurant one time when I looked out the window and saw an elderly person slip and fall on their way in. They looked to be OK but were having trouble getting up. I noticed it about the same time as the person in line next to me, and I said, “Gosh, I hope he’s OK.” The other person got out of line and ran outside to help them get up. What I said was nice, what she did was kind. Kindness may be inconvenient, it may make us lose our place in line, it may cost us something – time, effort, comfort, pride, ego. But that’s what makes it meaningful.

So, if we have a choice between being nice or being kind, why should we choose kindness, especially if it costs us? Did I mention that the word “kind” is in the Bible 188 times? I’m not going to read them all to you but let me give you a couple examples to go along with the passages already read today. You may have heard of a little chapter called I Corinthians 13, which tells us that love is patient, love is kind. You also may have heard of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians, which lists kindness along with love, peace, patience, and other fruits. And several verses in Proverbs address kindness, including Proverbs 14, which says, “Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.”

Here’s one more from the prophet Hosea, which I really like. In describing how God has taken care of the people of Israel, God says, “I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.” I love the description of kindness as lifting a baby to your cheek. You can feel the tenderness, the care, the gentleness in that statement. That is kindness.

The Hebrew word often used for kindness is “hesed,” which I talked about in a recent devotional. “Hesed” is a hard word to pin down because it has a variety of meanings. It can be loyalty, compassion, faithfulness. It’s the word used at the end of Psalm 23, which says, “Surely goodness and hesed will follow me all of the days of my life.” It’s most often translated as “loving-kindness,” describing God’s approach toward humanity. While we don’t often deserve it, God generously offers us hesed.

The New Testament word for kindness is even more interesting. The Greek word that is used is “chrestos,” which is very close to the name for Christ, which is “Christos.” Say them fast or with a Kentucky accent and it’s hard to tell them apart. That was true back then, as well, so that when people were talking about the “Christ-followers,” because of both the similarity of the

words and their behavior, they were often not called Christians, but “the kind ones.” I wonder if Christians today would still be identified by those around them as “the kind ones?”

We probably should, but too often we’re not, because it’s not always easy to be kind. I think it’s a lot more convenient to be nice than it is to be kind, but the Bible doesn’t say that “love is patient, love is nice.” I believe, like all the fruits of the Spirit, kindness is something to be practiced, to be strived for, because it doesn’t always come naturally to us.

In the Colossians passage I read, Paul encourages us to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. That means each day, we have to put on these attributes, making an intentional effort to bundle up with these Christ-like qualities. And as we seek to live them out, these qualities should blend together, like the colors of the rainbow. You can’t tell where red ends and orange begins. Likewise, our practice of patience and humility and compassion should naturally lead to kindness.

Our best example of what kindness looks like is Jesus. One commentator called him “kindness on two legs.” He was always kind, but he was not always nice. He rebuked the religious leaders for their greed and selfishness, he got angry at the money-changers who desecrated the temple, he even was frustrated with his disciples when they weren’t paying attention to what he was teaching them. He was not always nice. But in the way he saw other people for who they were, the way he let himself be interrupted to meet a need, the way he stood up for the oppressed and marginalized, he was kind.

Spoiler alert: we’re not Jesus. There are going to be times when we choose niceness over kindness, or, at our worst, we choose neither. That’s why we can be so thankful that God is kind to us, even when we don’t deserve it. But every day is a chance for us to practice God’s kindness, to treat others as a child of God, even when we feel they don’t deserve it. Who can we look in the eye and thank today? To whom can we speak a word of appreciation with sincerity? To whom can we lend a hand, even if it’s not convenient for us? Your kindness may be the only thing that motivates someone else to do the right thing, to not give up, to hold on a little bit longer.

Our world is not always kind to us or to others. But we can be. We can be the kind ones who remind people that Christ is still alive in this world, that he is not dead, that they matter to God so they matter to us. You’ll have a choice today to choose to be nice or choose to be kind. Whenever possible, be both! But I hope you will do your best to always choose kindness.