



The Fruit of the Spirit - Kindness

By: Dorothea J. Lotter

The native clutched his dying son and ran through the hot dust for 2 miles until he reached Africa's Baragwanath Hospital. Instinctively he knew it was too late. He sadly turned homeward with the baby cold in his arms. The child had died of gastric enteritis.

Vusamazulu Mutwa tearfully built a crude coffin and prepared his tiny son's body for burial. To a Bantu native, proper burial is vital. To be buried in an unknown grave would be the deepest disgrace that could befall him. But a Bantu has no access to any cemetery unless he belongs to a recognized church and the funeral is conducted by a minister. A well-known authority has said, "Determination to have a proper burial is a strong reason why natives turn to Christianity."¹

The grief-stricken parents went to their Christian pastor, whose church the wife had attended for many years; the father had never accepted the faith. When they asked for a funeral, the pastor refused without explanation.

Later Mutwa acidly wrote, "Strangely, the priest knew exactly what he was doing to me when he refused to bury my son. For over the years, I had explained to him all the laws and customs of the Bantu. He refused simply because I was not, with the rest of my family, a member of his church."

Vusamazulu Mutwa later wrote a scorching essay on "Why Christianity Has Failed in Africa." It is part of his bitter book, *Africa Is My Witness*, which charges, "The culprits are those petty dictators and sadists who wear their white collars the wrong way round."²

This abridged story from Charles Hembree's book, *Fruits of the Spirit*, vividly illustrates the cruelty Christians, often unintentionally, inflict on others.

By contrast, the Bible emphasizes kindness. It is to be a major Christian virtue, so important that Paul calls it a fruit of the Spirit.

The Greek term for kindness (*chrestotes*) appears 10 times in the New Testament. The King James Version translates it in Galatians as "gentleness," but as "kindness" on four other occasions. The New International Version translates the word as "kindness" in 9 of 10 occurrences.

Like the word love (*agape*), kindness (*chrestotes*) is closely related to *hesed* in the Old Testament, which stands for God's covenant love. Commenting on *hesed*, the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* says, "loving-kindness — is not far from the fullness of the meaning of the word."³

The lesson of our text is that the Holy Spirit enables us to show kindness in all our relationships as we sincerely seek His assistance.

Kindness begins in the heart

Helen Brenneman writes: “There was a man who had a heart transplant. But the operation was a total failure. For the man was a mean man and the heart was a kind heart. His body simply rejected it.”⁴

The Bible, however, tells us about a successful heart transplant: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezekiel 36:26).*

Like the mean man, we fallen human beings have a predisposition to be unkind! Unfortunately, even our salvation experience does not remove us from that temptation. Christians can be very cruel, like the priest in his response to the Bantu. And probably, without intending to be, all of us are cruel at times. The Word of God teaches us, however, that to please God we must cultivate the virtue of kindness.

Ephesians 4:31,32 says to “get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

In Colossians 3:12,13, Paul admonishes us, “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” A kind disposition is possible precisely because the Holy Spirit has given us a new heart as described by Ezekiel. This transformation process of the Spirit is emphasized in Titus 3:5: “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.”

Moses tried to do ministry prematurely and in his own strength. He became enraged and killed an Egyptian. Only after long years as a shepherd, followed by a life-changing encounter with the living Yahweh at the burning bush, did Moses become the meekest of men and a powerful leader of the people of God. We, too, can become fundamentally different people when we receive a change of heart which enables us to be kind to others.

Kindness is a growth process

You just don’t get up in the morning and say, “Beginning today, I’m going to be kind.” Even the best intentions fail if we rely on our own strength. Paul called kindness a fruit of the Spirit because it cannot be grown effectively without the Spirit’s continuing work in our lives.

Ephesians 5:18 admonishes us to “be filled with the Spirit.” The wider context shows that spiritual fullness results in changed behavior. “Submit to one another” (5:21); “Husbands, love your wives” (5:25); “Children, obey your parents” (6:1); “Fathers, do not exasperate your children” (6:4); “Slaves, obey your earthly masters” (6:5). Kindness is one of the products of the Spirit at work in our relationships.

Jesus was really stating much the same thing in John 15:5: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

The Holy Spirit according to Paul is the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9). So to abide in Christ is to live in the Spirit. They are one and the same. Abiding in Christ through the Spirit empowers us to live in obedience to all His commandments.

As we live in Spirit-filled obedience, these scriptural commands will continue to echo and re-echo throughout our lives: “Get rid of all bitterness, rage ... anger, brawling ... slander ... malice. Be kind ... compassionate ... forgiving” (Ephesians 4:31,32). “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness ... patience ... Bear with each other ... forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:12,13).

In Scripture, you notice how John tried to position himself for power and prestige during Jesus’ ministry. He and his brothers asked Jesus, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory” (Mark 10:37). That selfish request came during the childhood stage of John’s spiritual development. But he grew in spirit so that by the end of his life he was the epitome of kindness. John, one of the Sons of Thunder, became the Apostle of Love as reported over

and over in 1 John. By the power of the Spirit, he had learned the lesson of kindness.

Kindness produces results

The Bible shows that kindness, admittedly costly to us, produces positive results: “A kind man benefits himself” (Proverbs 11:17). This verse brings to mind people like Mark Buntain and Billy Graham. Mark Buntain was loved and honored in life. In death, thousands of people stood for hours in the hot Indian sun to honor him. He poured out his life to minister to the spiritual and physical needs of Calcutta.

Dr. Graham’s presence is requested by kings and leaders throughout the world. President Bush was quick to call him to the White House the night the United States went to war with Iraq. A humble, beloved man who manifests kindness, Dr. Graham has earned the respect of the secular and Christian communities.

Kindness opens doors for service. Barnabas, Son of Encouragement, sold a field and gave the money for relief of the saints (Acts 4:37). He was sensitive to hurting people in need of assistance. The Spirit later marked him out as the first missionary companion of the apostle Paul.

Undoubtedly, this act of kindness in support of the poor was an important part of Barnabas’s growth in service! It testified to the Christian community of his fitness.

Kindness also softens the hard and angry hearts of men. “A gentle answer turns away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1).

Some years ago, while I was working with a student withdrawing from seminary, it became apparent that he was on the verge of an emotional collapse. He was hostile, and somewhat incoherent. It would not have taken much to provoke him. Seeking the Lord for wisdom as we talked, I sensed Him beautifully guiding, enabling me to respond gently and work through his concerns. He left relaxed, satisfied he had secured what he needed.

Our example will also lead others to be kind. Peter Ainslie, in his book, *Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit*, says, “No influence is so powerful in human society as practicing kindness,” and illustrates with the following story:

A rail fence between two Virginia farms had settled and needed repair. The cattle from one farm wandered into the cornfield of the other, doing considerable damage. The farmer who suffered the loss wrote a severe threatening letter to his neighbor who owned the cattle. The neighbor responded by letter, expressing deep regrets, offering to pay the damages and reminding the farmer that through the years his cattle, too, had made like depredations on him. He had never notified him, however, but had simply repaired the fence, knowing that those situations sometimes occur despite precautions. The next morning, the offended farmer begged his neighbor’s forgiveness, and from that time on they were the best of friends.⁵

Kindness demonstrates Christ to the world.

“The greatest thing a man can do for a Heavenly Father,” said Henry Drummond, “is to be kind to some of His other children.” And Frederick William Faber commented, “Kindness has converted more sinners than zeal, eloquence, or learning.” Prayer for the salvation of others must be coupled with Spirit-empowered kindness if we are to be effective in winning them to the Lord.

Conclusion

Our emphasis on kindness may sound good in theory, but does it really happen in practice? Does the Holy Spirit actually help us to develop kindness? Are not some people just “naturally” kind?

It is impossible to produce genuine Christlike kindness as described in Galatians 5:22 by ourselves. A new heart is required. Then a growth process follows which can only take place as we submit to and obey the Holy Spirit. He nurtures those positive character changes that are reflected in our relationships.

Kindness, or the lack of it, makes a difference in our lives. As a child, I knew very well what it meant to be subjected to the blighting cruelty of a father who punished capriciously, his reasoning unclear.

But then I met the Heavenly Father, who generously poured out His love on me. In kindness, He nurtured me. He was understanding, gentle, and approachable. He gave hope when I had none. He guided, opened doors, encouraged, and listened to my concerns.

Through Him I found the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit, who helped me turn that cruelty into kindness.

We, like the Bantu father who was denied a Christian funeral for his son, may also experience cruelty in the church.

When that happens, we need the powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit to walk through those hurts without bitterness.

If we are willing, He enables us to respond in love and kindness. He gives the strength to forgive, and heals painful memories.

We must purpose in our hearts not to be part of the cruelty in our church and world. Rather, we must be sensitive to the needs of people, showing kindness to those we serve — to friends and enemies alike.

May we resolve, in our cultivation of the fruit of kindness, to seek the inexhaustible resources of the gentle, yet dynamic Holy Spirit whom God has so graciously poured out on us to manifest kindness. For it is “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty” (Zechariah 4:6).

*All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Endnotes

1. Charles Hembree, *Fruits of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 65.
2. *Ibid.*, 65,66.
3. R. Laird Harris, “hsd,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltkl (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 305.
4. John M. Drescher, *Spirit Fruit* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1974), 218.
5. Peter Ainslie, *Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1968), 47.

© Dorothea J. Lotter

Reprinted from *Enrichment* journal, used with permission.