

The Fruit of the Spirit

Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Kindness

Galatians 5:22 – 23

Neighborhood Church of Dorchester, July 21, 2019

Introduction: Kindness Defined

I wrestled a lot with this message because I don't want to be cliché. And it was strange that a lot of clichés about kindness appeared in my Facebook feed this week. 'Practice random acts of kindness.' That's a cliché. Is it interesting? Yes. Is that all there is to kindness? No, not at all. So we have to go much, much deeper than clichés about kindness. I also wrestled with this message because I don't want to be idealistic in a way that doesn't touch our lives. So when we think of kindness, it'd be easy to mention how Denzel Washington paid for Chadwick Boseman to go to college – for one semester's tuition. And that's inspiring, especially because Denzel is a Christian. But how do we do that on a much smaller budget? And how do we show kindness in other ways?

Kindness is an action, or something that we do outwardly towards others, as we draw near to them. But kindness is also a motivation, something that we feel towards others. And, we must believe that Jesus feels kindness towards others. When Jesus saw people coming towards him, he felt compassion for them. He felt kindness. And he acted with kindness, even when he challenged people, called them into a life of service and sacrifice and love, and called them to grow. It was all his kindness.

Context:

We are in Paul's letter to the Galatians. This is a section called 'the fruit of the Spirit.' He is listing character qualities that flow out of our union with Jesus and partnership with Jesus by his Spirit. The word 'fruit' comes from the image of gardening, where life bears fruit. The life of a strawberry plant comes forth in strawberries. Life bears fruit. And there is life in the fruit: seeds are literally the sign of new life. The word 'fruit' also comes from childbearing. People back in that day and sometimes even today speak of the 'fruit' of the womb. A child is new life, the seed of new human life found in the womb of a mother. So if we follow Jesus, and believe in him as Lord and Savior, then we will bear fruit: Jesus' Spirit will bring forth his life in us. It is the fruit of his Spirit.

So we've been working through this list of character qualities. And we are on kindness. Now we as human beings show kindness to people when we want a connection, an attachment, when we want something from others. But we have to live within Jesus' definition of kindness, because Jesus calls us to be kind even when we cannot receive something from others. His motivations are deeper than ours. His eyes see more than ours. And his actions are broader and more thoughtful than ours.

Kindness and Your Attachment Style¹

So let's also talk about ourselves. Because we have to explore our own motivations for attachment, allow Jesus to shape our motivations into his, and then consider the actions that will match what he is doing in us. I'm going to describe five motivations for attachment. You might find yourself in more than one. That's okay. I'm going to use Marvel movie superheroes to describe each one.

Avoidant: Tony Stark

- Tony was a playboy and had a hard time committing to Pepper Potts. In the earlier movies, when he disagreed with Nick Fury or Captain America, he often didn't keep eye-contact with them, and kept turning away. He used humor or sarcasm to defuse situations that were too emotional or too intense. When the teenage Peter Parker, aka Spiderman, comes into the series, Tony *almost* hugs him in the car. When he finally 'knight' Peter as an Avenger, he says, 'You're an Avenger now,' which means the world to Peter, but Tony hardly makes eye-contact.

¹ I am basing this typology off of material discussed by Charisma on Command, "Attachment Theory – How Your Childhood Affects Your Love Style," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP-nPJbTgTs&t=539s>. They used four 'types.' I expanded to five types by adding 'aggressive.'

- That highlights one possible factor in the heart of the Avoidant person. Connection is pain. Why? Because one or both parents were emotionally unavailable. Or abusive. In *Iron Man 2*, Tony talks about his father. He explains, 'He was cold. He was calculating. He never told me he loved me. He never even told me he liked me.' So the Avoidant person feels discomfort with connection. He or she invests much more in the beginning phases of a friendship or a romance than later phases. They are charming friends or dates at first, but are not good long-term partners because they bounce. Whenever conflict comes up, they ghost you.
- One Avoidant person Jesus encounters is the guy who is filled with a Legion of demons (Lk.8:26 – 39). Jesus pursues him to where he lives, which is a graveyard. He asks him, 'What is your name?' over and over. The guy keeps saying, 'I am legion, for we are many,' as Jesus keeps casting demons out. Until finally, it seems like the guy wants freedom for real, and Jesus casts the demons out. Afterwards, he can reenter community.
- Kindness as a motivation: For the Avoidant person, you have to remove the blockage you have to connection. You want to be an island. Reflect on how people have really made a positive impact on you.
- Kindness as an action: Write a note of appreciation.
- Illus: The person I can be the most avoidant with is my mom. So after I graduated from college and started earning my first 'real' paycheck, I felt like I wanted to show my mom I appreciated her. It was also the first year after my parents' divorce. I found a special kind of Japanese tea set that I knew my mom would like. These were the days before eBay and Amazon! I found it! It cost a couple hundred dollars. But I gave it to her and said that I thanked her for pouring her life into my sister and me. She really did instill a sense of safety, discipline, consistency despite my dad's alcoholism. I challenged my own tendency to be an island and avoid connection.

Anxious: Peter Parker

- The Anxious type fears the loss of connection. Being without a connection feels like dying. This is the person who tends to obsess about how their friendships are doing. Has it been too long? Should I check in? What if they've misinterpreted what I said? Is she mad at me? Is that why she didn't text me yesterday?
- In the Marvel movies, Peter Parker has a mild case of this. He's already lost his parents. Then he loses his Uncle Ben Parker. He has his Aunt Mae, but he's looking for a mentor. When Tony Stark, Iron Man, discovers him and mentors him, he really tries to win Tony's approval. There are two scenes in *Spiderman Homecoming* when Tony rescues Peter. One time, he sends an empty Iron Man suit remote controlled, and says, 'Stay low to the ground. Can't you be a friendly, neighborhood Spiderman?' The second time Tony rescues Peter, Peter's reaction is, 'If you even cared, you'd actually be here.' He wants the mentor's approval, the blessing of the father figure. Then the Iron Man suit opens up and Tony *is* inside.
- Consciously or unconsciously, the anxious person uses the pain they feel as a way to control other people. They are needy of attention and yet expecting abandonment. Connection is valuable but unpredictable and impermanent.
- In the earthly life of Jesus, one person who was kind of Anxious was the leper (Lk.5:12 – 16). The leper wanted connection, but was worried because of his leprosy that no one would want to connect with him. He falls at Jesus' feet and says, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' What does Jesus do? He says, 'I am willing; be cleansed' and touches him. Maybe on the shoulder, or the face. Jesus knew that this guy hadn't been touched for years, probably. But he was Anxious for a hug, a human touch.
- Kindness as a motivation: If you're an Anxious type, then you've probably got a lot of skills at kindness. But that may be because you are good at keeping people around you. Instead, the kindness you can practice is to release people from the fear you have of them forgetting about you, or not appreciating you.
- Kindness as an action: See and bless their contribution to other people. Whether you're a friend, a mentor, a spouse, or a parent.

Avoidant and Anxious (Fearful): Nebula

- Some people are both avoidant AND anxious. They bounce between people pleasing behavior, and the anger and fear of losing friendship. They are unpredictable and because of their fear, they sabotage themselves. They shoot themselves in the foot while pursuing the things they say they want.
- Nebula wanting to please her father, Thanos. But her relationship with her sister Gamora is how she shows that she is afraid of connection and yet wants it and is afraid to lose it. Thanos made Nebula and Gamora

fight each other all the time. And because Nebula always lost, she had this love-hate relationship with Gamora. There is this painfully awkward scene when Gamora gives her a hug, and Nebula just stands there. But she grows over the course of being part of the Guardians of the Galaxy team. She sees how her father was manipulative and evil. So she chooses to side with the Avengers against Thanos. She sides with her sister Gamora for personal reasons but also larger moral reasons. Most importantly, she risks her life and is willing to suffer again for a cause much bigger than herself.

- Simon Peter was the person who demonstrates both the Avoidant and Anxious swing. In Luke 5, he falls down at Jesus' feet and says, 'Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.' He doesn't want to have Jesus see him fail. But a few years later, Simon Peter says, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' At first he avoids connection with Jesus and then he is anxious about losing it.
- Kindness as a motivation: The internal choice you need to make first and foremost is that suffering is part of this life. Will you suffer with Jesus and for Jesus? Or will you suffer against him?
- Kindness as an action: Repent of blaming people for things that weren't really their fault. If you're a Fearful person, then you find it very easy to blame people. When you feel a negative feeling about something, you look for someone to blame for it.
- Illus: me waiting for my mom's moving truck on the day I was supposed to be at a graduation ceremony at Boston College. In the end I wasn't able to make it. But what was I feeling as I waited for the moving truck? I was mad. But why? Was I not going to be friends with friends who were graduating because I didn't make it? No. Was I being controlled by my mom? No. It just happened. This life involves suffering. I can get mad at the situation. But there are times that no one in particular is to blame. I need to repent of blaming people for things that aren't really their fault.
- You might also need to repent of blaming yourself for something that wasn't really your fault. If you blame yourself for your parents' split when you were a child, that's actually wrong and it fills you with a sense of false power, as if you could have done something to make them stay together, which is what turns you into a manipulative person in the end. That's what is so powerful in the movie Good Will Hunting when Robin Williams says to Matt Damon, 'It's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault.' Until he breaks down and begins to accept it. Suffering is just a part of this life. Is someone to blame? You can blame Satan or Adam and Eve only if it's helpful for you to not blame God. God is not to blame for suffering because God is trying to undo all the suffering and evil in Jesus and by the Spirit while honoring other people's free choices to love what they choose to love. God honored your choices. Why can't you honor others?

Aggressive: Thanos

- Extreme confidence, even arrogance and narcissism. This is the person that assumes that people want to be connected to her or him. They have this grandiose sense of themselves. So they use kindness as a bargaining tool.
- Thanos killed half the universe and then expected to be thanked for it. Just like he abducted his 'daughters' after killing their people, and sparing their lives, and expected them to feel grateful to him. That's an extreme version.
- The more moderate versions are: the husband who does chores so he can feel entitled to sex from his wife, and demand it; the wife who has sex with her husband so she can demand other things from him; the parents who do things for their children and then say what a burden they are; the friend who assumes you want to hear everything they have to say about everything.
- There was a guy named Nicodemus who thought Jesus was privileged to meet with him. He was 'the teacher of Israel,' probably the leading intellectual figure among the Pharisees and on the Sanhedrin.
- Kindness as a motivation: See the love that Jesus has for every other person independently of you. That means Jesus is really at the center, not you.
- Kindness as an action: Give away the spotlight. You can be the life of the party for a minute. You can contribute your humor and large personality. But let it pass. Or give someone else the opportunity to shine. Or turn and focus on someone else. Stop using kindness as a way to get the spotlight back, or put people in your debt.

Secure: Nakia, Steve Rogers

- Nakia, and the older T'Challa, or Steve Rogers and Peggy Carter. Secure people can be vulnerable and open up because they believe that despite the pain that comes with connection or life, they'll be okay. They

don't run away. But neither do they cling. Nakia came back and served her country even though her situation with T'Challa was complicated. She recognized a higher duty than her own feelings, and was perfectly willing to leave him again if he hadn't changed. She was the moral center of the movie *Black Panther* because T'Challa had to agree with her position on Wakanda's role in the world. He rejected the isolationism of his father, and the imperialism of Killmonger. Who was right the whole time? Nakia. Steve Rogers went to visit the elderly, senile version of Peggy Carter, and still felt love for her even though they were now decades apart. He was able to express that in words, even though she was an elderly bedridden woman who lost her short term memory every five minutes.

- Now from the Marvel universe, it's easy to use those couples as examples of the Secure type. But Secure types show up in friendships, as well. Black Widow had an arc of growth as a person where she could be vulnerable as a friend about her losses. After Thanos snapped people out of existence, she cries and has her ballerina shoes next to her, suggesting that she was going back to a point in her life that was about beauty and not violence. So Secure types do feel fear and pain. They don't stuff those feelings aside or brush them away. They simply believe that they have the strength to deal with disappointments or losses or challenges. They're comfortable in conflict because they aren't afraid of abandonment, so they can keep their voice steady. Steve Rogers could totally argue with Tony Stark in *Captain America Civil War*. And yet afterwards, he could apologize first for certain things he did. He acknowledged Tony's feelings. He could offer a path for reconciliation when he delivered the note and the cell phone if Tony needed to call him. And he could let Tony go, because Tony had a lot to sort out in terms of his own moral compass.
- Because Secure types are not driven by fear, they can focus on the quality of the connection, not on simply whether there is a connection. Insecure types focus on whether there is a connection. Secure types ask what is the quality of the connection. But, Secure types can become selfish, too, more out of laziness than anything else.
- A Secure person in the New Testament is the rich young ruler (Mt.19:13 – 30; Mk.10:13 – 35; Lk.18:18 – 30). He says, 'What more do I need to do?' And Jesus says, 'Sell everything you have, give to the poor, and come, follow me.' The rich young ruler had this nice little bubble. Jesus called him into his mission to the whole world.
- Kindness as a motivation: Repent of laziness. Understand that your steadiness is a skill that Jesus wants other people to have, too. So you need to participate in Jesus' mission more and more.
- Kindness as an action: Invest in others. Invest in building Christian community of the church. Even when it costs you, or when you feel like you're not getting much back.

Kindness Is Not Leniency

So right away, let's deal with one wrong definition of kindness. Kindness is not leniency. Kindness is not being lenient with yourself, or others. At times, we think that Jesus calls us to such a radical mission and high standards that we should be lenient. 'I'll go easy on you,' and that's kindness, supposedly. That is not kindness. There is a way to be patient with people, and we'll talk about patience next week. But releasing people from Jesus' mission and calling is not kindness.

When I was in campus ministry, one of the biggest questions was about alcohol. And sometimes it was tempting for me to just look the other way on alcohol issues. One evening several Christian students decided that they were going to go to a frat party and drink alcohol, because that would show that Christians are cool people, too. So they thought. During that party, they noticed a guy who was a freshman, and they recognized him. They also recognized that he was very, very drunk, and he went to lie down. The Christians were not comfortable with how drunk that guy was. But at some point the Christians left the party. Later that night, that freshman guy choked on his own vomit, and died. The Christian students were shocked. Everybody on campus was. They went to go talk to a mentor of mine. She asked them, 'Well, why were you at the party? Were you there because you wanted to be available to Jesus and on duty to him?' We are called to be different. To be alert at all times, for Jesus, and ready to serve him. And you never know when your faith can save someone else's life. If you can be in party settings and have integrity, then great! Do that. But non-Christians will not come to Jesus if they only see you drinking and getting drunk. They see plenty of people getting drunk. That hasn't made them come to Jesus already, has it? They will come to Jesus when they see the kindness of Jesus, expressed by us, his people. And we are to be always *available to Jesus*. So my mentor showed kindness to those students when she reminded them of Jesus' mission and high standards. Leniency is not kindness. Patience is important, too, and patience is not leniency. We'll talk about that in the coming weeks. But let's go in the conviction that kindness in Christ and with Christ involves all of who we are, and where we are.

