The Fruitful Life

Week 5: Kindness and Goodness

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness*… (Galatians 5:22)

Here are a few places that the Bible talks about this topic. Read the following verses out loud with your group to help frame your conversation:

**Scriptures**: Proverbs 21:21, Psalm 23:6, Micah 6:8, Colossians 3:12, 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Author Jerry Bridges notes that kindness and goodness naturally go together due to their close relation to each other. He writes, “Kindness is a sincere desire for happiness of others; goodness is the activity calculated to advance that happiness.” With that in mind, let's look at these two character traits in Paul’s list together.

First, kindness. Pastor and author Tim Keller, in a sermon on 1 Corinthians 13 (“Love is patient, love is kind…”), pointed out that virtually everyone views himself as “kind.” No one likes to think of himself as “unkind.” However, what does kindness really look like in a person?

Here are two key thoughts to explore as we think about biblical kindness:

1. Kindness is more than disposition. Everyone is born with a certain natural amount of kindness (or lack thereof) of kindness. Then, the experiences of our lives either add to or take away from this natural amount of kindness and create in us a certain disposition – either towards kindness or not. The end result is that for some people kindness comes easily to them simply because of their disposition. Just like dunking basketball comes naturally to most tall people.

   However, this is not what Paul is talking about here. If it were, then the vast majority of us who do not naturally practice kindness would be at a pretty unfair disadvantage. Rather, Paul is saying that true, godly kindness is a supernatural gift that works in spite of someone’s disposition. This means that, no matter what disposition we possess, we are called to cultivate a life of kindness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

2. Kindness is both internal and external. Once we realize that kindness is something that the Holy Spirit wants to work within us, we need to also realize the scope of this work. Which is this: kindness is supposed to seep into every area of our beings. In short, we are called to cultivate kindness in our hearts and our actions.

   Why is this so important to grasp? Because it is entirely possible to feel certain amount of kindness in our hearts towards someone, yet never act on it. The point of God giving us that gift of kindness – to bless others – terminates before it ever reaches its intended purpose. And the reverse is also true. It is entirely possible to do kind acts, yet foster bitterness, resentment, and anger in our hearts towards the very person we are “blessing” with our “kind” acts. We must seek complete kindness. Which takes the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish.

Which leads us now to goodness.

The idea behind this word is integrity. Or, to put it another way, to do the right thing, regardless of who is around you, what your circumstances you face, what consequences you might endure, etc. In short, you are the same person in every context.

How are these two traits of the fruit of the Spirit connected?

It works like this: every time we do something, we are acting on a motivation. For example, when your body tells you that its hungry, you are motivated to eat something. You will then usually go get something eat. Motivations lead to actions.
Anytime we try to live lives of goodness, we need to examine our motivations. Why are we doing the right thing? Are we trying to get ahead and seek our own personal gain? Are we bound by guilt and don’t want to get caught for doing the wrong thing? Do we think that we have to live up to someone else’s expectations, so we choose to do the right thing simply because we don’t want to let someone else down? Are we doing the right thing because we simply want to better than someone else? Too often, we end up doing the right thing in certain situations – having the appearance of integrity – but for all of the wrong reasons. What ends up happening, then, is that we actually become more self-centered, more fearful, more addicted to performance, more anxious over time, more self-righteous even while we’re outwardly doing good things.

And this is where Paul needles us a bit. He is saying, “I want you practice goodness in your lives. But I want you practice goodness for the right reasons – because you are truly focused on serving others. Not yourself. I want your goodness to be based upon your kindness towards those around you. Not based on what you can get out of being good in and of itself.”

This is a tremendous thought. And we might be tempted to write it off and say, “As long as the end result of good actions is there, what’s the difference about my motivations?” The difference is everything. Because, sooner or later, our motivations will find us out. If we’re living for ourselves – even if we’re doing good things for others but with faulty, selfish motives – we will stall out in our growth. And we will negate the power of the Holy Spirit to work true, biblical goodness in our lives.

Questions:

If you were to rank your natural disposition in terms of kindness, where would you fall? What experiences in your life have made you into a naturally kind person? Or, what experiences in your life have made it difficult for you to be kind?

What is challenging about cultivating internal and external kindness? Have you ever experienced a time when you had one without the other?

This idea of motives is huge and runs throughout the Bible. There’s not enough space to fully dig into it here, but begin by asking yourself what are your motivations for doing the good things that you do? Chances are, some will be legitimately good, while others will be legitimately selfish. And then, why is this question difficult to answer?

Exercise:

Are you experiencing deep, rich growth in your walk with God right now? This is kind of a trick question because growth is (very) often difficult to notice. Usually we don’t realize that we’ve grown until we look back over a long period of time and see how far we’ve come from where we started. So, God may be growing you right now, despite what you feel or see. However, there are times when growth in our life is made more difficult because we don’t know our own blind spots. And one the usual blind spots that can really stall us out is our motivations. Even if we’re doing things rightly on the outside, we can still be doing them wrongly on the inside. For example, we could practice generosity, but secretly be cultivating a hope that God will one day pay us back or that other people would see us and say how “generous” we are.

The problem with our motives is we don’t always know them. We need time and space – two things that are hard to find in our busy lives – to let the Holy Spirit sort them out for us. This week, set aside a period of time in which you be silent. Your task? Ask God to bring to your mind places in your life where you need your motivations challenged. Keep a pen and paper nearby to write down what He says to you. Then, specifically ask Him to speak to you about cultivating goodness based on kindness in your life.