

“The Spirit’s Fruit (Part 5): Kindness” Psalm 145:1-21; Galatians 5:22-23; Romans 2:1-4;

What is the most-quoted Bible verse? Do you think it’s John 3:16? For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son? Or maybe Psalm 23? The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want?

Maybe in churches. But outside of churches, I think the most-quoted Bible verse is Matthew 7:1: “Judge not!”

1. The Fake Fruit of Secular Kindness: Affirmation

Now, the secular world gets some things right by quoting this verse. First, they quote the very words of Jesus. Not bad! Second, the secular world suggests something fundamentally true about Jesus and about faith in Jesus by quoting this verse: Jesus came not to represent the judgement of God, but his grace and salvation!

But of course the secular world is not trying to be theologians by quoting Matthew 7:1 to us. The world says these words “judge not!” — and they are quoting our own book, and our own Jesus, as a witness against us. And what’s the charge they’re bringing? Usually what they mean is that we Christians are non-affirming.

15 years ago, I would have said that the fake fruit of secular kindness is tolerance. But now it’s not enough to tolerate people with whom you disagree about matters of morality. You can’t love the sinner but object to the sin. Try making a public case that prostitution or pornography is evil and bad for society. You won’t be told you’re old-fashioned. You’ll be told that you’re a bad person for not affirming people’s choices and professions.

The fake fruit of secular kindness is affirmation. If you’re kind, you’ll agree that the things I do are good. If you don’t affirm what I do, you’re unkind. Non-affirmation is almost hateful.

Paul doesn’t deal with this fake fruit of secular kindness in these four verses of Romans 2. But all of Paul’s work in the Greco-Roman world was done in the context of moral permissiveness. Christians were constantly belittled. Even the name “Christian” was a way that the world made fun of Jesus-followers, calling them “little Christs.” Why? Because they showed honor to women and slaves and the poor as well as to men and masters and the rich; because they embraced both Jewish and Gentile people; because they refused to participate in temple prostitution rituals;

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because they considered sexual fidelity to be a key way of honoring Jesus with their bodies.

“Be good citizens! We’re not saying you can’t affirm your Jewish Jesus, too. But c’mon: you’ve got to *affirm* our customs and actions and beliefs, too!”

So when Paul writes to the church at Rome about kindness and judgment, he writes to a church sitting right smack in the middle of the cultural capital of the world, a city which tells the world that we must all live in peace by affirming that Caesar is Lord, and that the local gods and goddesses and their priests and rituals are to be honored.

Pluralism is not the problem. I’m glad that we live in a pluralistic society where the City of Zurich, for example, no longer persecutes Catholics and anabaptists, just for a couple examples.

But the problem for pluralistic societies, like the ancient Roman Empire, and like our modern democracies, is when they fixate on the fake fruit of kindness: affirmation.

2. The Fake Fruit of Religious Kindness: Niceness

If the world fakes the fruit of kindness with affirmation, what fake fruit does religion bear instead of Spirit-borne kindness?

Religious people can be mean. But more often than not, religious people are *nice*. The opposite of kindness might be meanness, but the fake fruit of religious kindness is *niceness*.

Niceness is fake because it is essentially an avoidance strategy. We are nice because *we* want to keep things comfortable for *us*. We smile and are polite in order to keep from having disagreements; to keep things from getting too serious; to maintain social equilibrium in our religious clubs. And we look around, and we think: wow, we’re such a great church. Such nice folks here. Things are cozy. I’m fine. You’re fine. Everything is fine.

The first words of our passage today are nothing like this fake niceness. Paul writes “You, therefore, have no excuse!” He’s actually never met these people. In a way, his letter is a personal and theological introduction to this important church in this

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incredibly important city. And he’s only 1/16 of the way through his letter, and he is already “not being nice.” He’s already potentially disrupting the religious niceness that threatens to crowd the branches of the church where the fruit of kindness really belongs. And when you read the Corinthian letters and Galatians, you can tell you’re not dealing with someone who is looking to foster a religious community built on niceness.

There is nothing wrong with smiling in church. Paul wants us—once the virus is gone—to go back to greeting one another with a holy kiss. Life can be serious, and there’s a real sense in which a church ought to be a refuge from the dead-seriousness of life in a tough world. A place of laughter. A community of warm embrace. We crave that. We were made for it. But what we’re craving is not niceness; what we’re made for is not niceness. What we crave is to be truly known and to be truly loved. To have some people who know some of the worst stuff about us, but who nevertheless think, assume, hope, and believe the best about us.

3. The Spirit’s Fruit of Kindness

When the Spirit of God gets ahold of us, we begin to sink down roots and bear the fruit of kindness. Christopher Wright says that while patience is a *tough* fruit, kindness is a *tender* fruit. Patience is the strong backbone it takes to hang in there when things are not okay. Kindness is the soft heart it takes to want the best even for your enemies.

When the Spirit of God begins to bear the fruit of kindness in our lives, we stop (2:1) being *judgmental*. This doesn’t mean we stop having opinions. Or convictions. This doesn’t mean we affirm everything that everyone thinks and does. This doesn’t mean we smile and nod when people say and do ugly things. It means, instead, that we activate an awareness of the common humanity that we share with others.

The Roman playwright Terence lived a century-and-a-half before Christ. He was a slave, brought to Rome. His master gave him an education. Terence proved so brilliant that his master freed him, so that he could make the most of his gifts. What did the former slave turned playwright say when he reflected on his own life, his former master’s life, his surrounding society, which could be cruel? He said this: “I am human, and therefore nothing human is foreign to me.”

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The great Black American literary giant Maya Angelou, who was no stranger to the cruelty of the world and the hateful speech of many of her neighbors likewise made it her personal practice to see every one of her neighbors as a *person*, made in God’s image. She says it was a discipline. It wasn’t easy.

Being nice is far easier than bearing kindness. Affirming all opinions and actions is far easier than bearing kindness. Paul says (3) “When you, a mere human being, pass judgment on people ... you do the same things!” And he doesn’t mean we always literally do the same behaviors, necessarily. What he means is that judgmental, unkind people have (5) stubborn and unrepentant hearts. People who have never looked at themselves honestly, seen their own brokenness and sin, and experienced the forgiveness of God in Jesus, *cannot be kind*. It is a fruit of the Spirit, borne out of what God is doing in and through us as *our* own brokenness is acknowledged, mended, healed, and restored to wholeness by grace.

If we have (4) “contempt for God’s kindness, forbearance, and patience” with us; if we’ve failed to see (4) that God’s kindness is intended to lead us to repentance, to faith, to growth, to renewal, to wholeness; then we can’t *not* judge others. Since we’re not embracing and experiencing forgiveness and kindness despite our brokenness, we *have* to judge others. “At least I’m not as awful as *them*.”

Without receiving God’s kindness, we might be affirming. We might be nice. But we’ll never be kind.

4. Jesus the kindness-bearer

Maybe some of you don’t believe it’s possible. To be truly known. To be *seen*. Seen for who you really are. With all your humanity, beautiful and broken. And still to be *loved*. Maybe you think it’s wishful thinking to suggest that someone might be able to make an accurate judgment about who you really are, what you’re really like, when no one is watching, and yet not to be judgmental.

How could any mere human being escape from the vicious cycle of mean-spirited judgementality? How could a mere human *not* affirm everything about others when they know they’re full of contradictions themselves? How could a mere human not settle for finding a little pocket of niceness, a religious club or a religious-ish club to assure itself that we’re all ok? Do we really dare ask for more?

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The surprising turn of events in the mere human, the “human, all too human” story, is that by God’s kindness, the human story does not remain a merely human story. It does not remain a “human, all too human” story. But rather, Paul writes to Titus, “When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (Titus 3:4-5). As Christopher Wright says, Jesus is “kindness incarnate—kindness on two legs.” That is, God’s kindness showed up in a human. But not in a *mere* human. But in God’s Son, Jesus.

Jesus doesn’t look in the mirror and say, “well, I’d better be kind, even to people who do nasty things, because, after all, I’ve done some nasty things myself.” He says, “Father, I would be delighted to step into broken humanity and to bear your kindness. To show up in flesh and blood bearing your kindness. To fully see and fully know broken humans, and yet to bear your kindness toward them. To make your own accurate and impeccable judgment about their brokenness, but without judgmentality and instead with an abundance of kindness. Father, I, who know no sin, will be glad to become sin for them, so that they might become your own righteousness through this radical kindness that I will bear in my very body.”

Could there be something better than imitation kindness? Something better than tolerance and the affirmation of everything and the cult of niceness that we’ve settled on in our secular and religious lives? There could be something better. Because there has been something better, and there is something better: the kindness of God, borne fruitfully in the Lord Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. When it plants itself in your heart and grows up in your life, you’ll lose your appetite for the fake fruit, and you’ll begin to bear the real thing: the Spirit’s fruit of kindness, in and through God’s own kindness to us: Jesus.

May it be so among us.