

Do-Gooding I Thessalonians 5:15

You better watch out!
 You better not cry.
 You better not pout.
 I'm telling you why . . .
 Santa Claus is coming to town.
 He sees you when you're sleeping.
 He knows when you're awake.
 He knows when you've been bad or
 good,
 So be good for goodness sake!

This may be a great seasonal song, but it is not great Christian theology.

Actually, I somehow like the part about being “good for goodness sake”. But, I dislike the notion that Santa Claus is somehow omniscient and knows everything, since only God knows everything. But, most interesting is the notion that Santa Claus treats us on the basis of our being bad or good. Good kids get good gifts and bad kids may get no gifts at all.

Obviously, Santa Claus is never credited with reading 1 Thessalonians 5:15 where it says, “*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.*” In other words, always do good.

That certainly sounds nice and very Christmassy, and it is. But these words are for every season and for every day. It is the stunningly different way that Christians are to relate to the rest of the world. We are to make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong.

There are three basic ways to relate to others. One is the criminal way which repays evil for good. In Victor Hugo’s classic story *Les Miserables* an escaped convict finds refuge in the home of the local bishop. In response to the bishop’s generosity the criminal steals the bishop’s silver candlesticks. It is the criminal way to relate to others—evil for good.

That criminal way is frighteningly selfish. There is little or no concern about the property or person of others. So, the criminal mind says if you want something take it, rape, hurt others even if they have done you no harm. Hurt others even if they have done you good.

Our society frowns on such behavior. It is unacceptable and despised. So we have laws and agencies to catch criminals and exact punishment. Yet there are many who adopt the criminal way and are never caught. Usually it is stealing from the company that has been good in providing a job or being unkind to family members who never did anything to deserve such treatment or greedily taking advantage of the generosity of a friend. It’s criminal but it’s commonplace to give evil in return for good.

Another way to relate is the civilized way. The civilized way is clearly a notch better than the criminal way. The civilized way repays good for good and evil for evil. In fact, I would say the general ethic of civilized society is to get even and keep even. In other words, if someone is kind to you, you owe that person and you need to be kind in return. If someone is unkind to you, you owe them meanness in return. According to the civilized way we need to do everything possible to keep the score as close to even as possible.

Examples of this are many. If a friend lends you money during a tough time, you have to lend him money when the tables are turned. If a co-worker swears at you, you swear back. If relatives treat you rotten, treat them rotten in return.

If a neighbor gives you a compliment about your yard, you must pay some kind of compliment back.

This can be an extraordinarily difficult system to maintain because

it requires keeping mental records of every wrong and right in life. We have to recall who sent us Christmas cards last year and who didn’t. We must remember how we were treated by our parents as kids, by our pastors in churches, by our employees at work, by our business associates in the marketplace and by everyone else. We have to categorize everyone as either “naughty or nice”.

We must design an individualized response to every piece of data—big good for this guy, little good for that guy; big revenge for this person and tiny revenge for that person. In fact, much of the

***Always return good for good
 and good for evil.***

energy of life is expended keeping track and keeping even. It is an enormous job.

What makes it worse is that we make mistakes. Occasionally we are nice to someone who has hurt us or we're erroneously mean to someone who didn't deserve it. That kicks in their system of getting even and requires us to be extra mean or extra nice to straighten things out the next time around. It is the civilized way—good for good; evil for evil. Certainly the civilized way is considered a notch better than the criminal way. But it is not the best way, nor is it the Christian way.

The Christian way is to repay good for evil. 1 Thessalonians 5:15 says, "*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.*" It is such a simple system. There are no records to keep or scores to settle. It is good for good or good for evil. It is giving good either way, no matter what. It is the way of Jesus.

We pray it in the Lord's Prayer: "*Our Father . . . forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" We hear Jesus preaching it in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:38-42:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

Jesus put it differently in Matthew 18:22. When Peter asked how many times to forgive someone who sinned against him, Jesus told him "*seventy-seven times*"—an infinite number. And Jesus added in Luke 6:30-31, "*Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.*"

But the New Testament doesn't limit this behavior to the sayings of Jesus. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 12:17, "*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.*" He continues in Romans 12:21, "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*" And in 1 Peter 3:9 we read, "*Do*

not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing"

Let there be no doubt about what is the Christian way. We may agree or disagree with it. We may want to offer specific situations and argue personal exceptions. But let us not argue that the Bible says that the Christian way is very, very different from the criminal way or the civilized way. The way of Jesus Christ is to make sure that nobody repays wrong for wrong. Always return good for good and good for evil.

But, how do we do that? 1 Thessalonians 5:15 goes on to say, "*. . . always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.*" That's an interesting expression—"always try to be kind." It sounds like we ought to at least give it our best shot but there are some characters and some circumstances where it just won't work.

That's really not what is meant here. The Greek word means to "pursue eagerly and earnestly". In other words, really want to be kind. Don't take the attitude that says, "Well, I'll try to be nice for a little while, but it won't work with that nerd!" Rather, we are to be like Jesus. We are to be patient even when provoked. We are to strive to say kind things to people who say unkind things to us, to feel love for others we might not be inclined to love and to be nice no matter what.

We know what it means to be eager to get a date. We know what it means to be eager to get even. We know what it means to earnestly desire the Vikings to win the Super Bowl. Well, take that same idea of eagerness and understand that Christians are those who are eager to be kind to everybody.

A new book came in my mail this week with an interesting story in it about a neighbor who was outraged by two chickens that wandered into his vegetable patch. He grabbed the chickens, wrung their necks and threw them back over the fence.

The chickens were still flapping their wings when the woman came running out of the house. Her children were hiding but watching to see what she would do. She took the dead chickens, plucked and cleaned them and made them into two chicken pies. When the pies were finished she took one of them to the neighbor across the fence and gave it to him as a gift along with an apology for any damage the chickens had done to his vegetable garden.

She lived what 1 Thessalonians 5:15 teaches! She refused to repay wrong for wrong. She was eager to be kind. She chose the Christian way.

Let me add, we all have neighbors killing our chickens and throwing them over our fences. We then must choose what to do. We can shout. We can sue. We can shoot. But the Christian way is to “*always try to be kind*”.

Take note that it is not generic kindness; it is personal kindness . . . “*always be kind to each other.*” There is a sad but true assumption here. It is the assumption that Christians will be wronged by other Christians. Do I need to tell you that Christians cheat each other? Do I need to tell you that Christians are unkind? Do I need to tell you that Christians gossip or lie or lose their tempers or abuse or are immoral?

Some of us (many of us!) know from painful personal experience. Some of us have brothers and sisters in Christ who will

not speak to us, who owe us money, who speak to us in demeaning words, who consider us enemies. The issue is not that Christians may be wronged by other Christians; the issue is how we respond.

Always try to be kind to each other. When another Christian wrongs you, respond every time—ALWAYS—with kindness. Always be kind to each other. Always! Always! No exceptions! Every time!

With some hesitation, let me tell you a personal experience. Many years ago there was a young man who deeply hurt me. He said and did some things that were unkind. He spread some rumors that were untrue. I remember going home one day in the middle of the day and lying face down in the bed and crying, asking God what to do. Part of me wanted to do the civilized thing and get even. But God, at least that time, graciously pushed me to do the Christian thing and to be kind, even though wronged.

Years passed. He moved away. We also moved. Then one day our phone rang and I answered it. The caller didn’t identify himself but asked me to

guess who he was. I knew the voice well and called him by name. He said he called to thank me for treating him right when he had treated me wrong.

I realize from that experience that the scripture is really true. As Christians we should always be kind to each other. No matter how we’re treated.

But our kindness is not to be limited just to other Christians. 1 Thessalonians 5:15 goes on to say that we should “*always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.*” Perhaps the greatest evidence of the power of Christ in our lives is in our kindness to non-Christians when they are unkind to us.

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During the Middle Ages in Europe there was a severe persecution against followers of Jesus Christ. In fact, many of them were martyred. One very cold winter night a Christian man was being pursued across the ice by soldiers who were out to get him. He made it safely to the other side and to freedom when the ice broke and the soldiers fell in. What would you do?

He decided to risk his own life to go back. Crawling on his belly across the ice he saved one of the soldiers. Then the two of them worked together to save the next until all the soldiers were saved. And what was his reward? They arrested him, tried him and executed him. Yet there are those who say that his one astonishing act of Christian kindness did more to win that region of northern Europe to Jesus Christ than all the combined soldiers that ever marched and all the sermons that were ever preached.

There is enormous power in the Christian way of kindness. Certainly the Thessalonians knew this. They were harassed and persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles. It would have been understandable for them to retaliate. It would have been easy for them to become bitter. But instead, they became one of the few 1st century churches to survive until 1988. That was because they made sure that nobody paid back wrong for wrong but always tried to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

One of the great letters of the New Testament is to the Ephesians, but you can go to Ephesus today and all you'll see is one big hunk of ruins. There isn't even a town left there. In fact, many of the churches that are referred to in the New Testament and to whom the Epistles of the New Testament were written are either gone as towns or no longer exist as churches. That's not so for Thessalonica. You can go to Thessalonica today and visit the church at Thessalonica.

You may wonder why some churches have survived through 2,000 years and others have not. I don't contend that this is a full explanation, but

I think it may be at least in part because the disciples of Jesus Christ took very seriously this instruction in scripture and they tried to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

It is Christmastime . . . time for making our lists and checking them twice. On those lists let us include any who have done us wrong. In addition to that, let us resolve to do them right and to try to be kind. Be kind . . . not just for goodness' sake, but for Jesus' sake.

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