

Being Nice not Nasty • Romans 12

Earlier this year we were in Florida visiting my mother who lives in the megaplex that runs from West Palm Beach to Miami. There's lots of traffic year 'round, but it was winter when the snowbirds have driven their cars south from all the colder climates.

While driving our rental car I told Charleen that no one had been nice to us the whole time we'd been there. Our turn signals were ignored. Everyone stayed close behind the next car so we couldn't enter the traffic lanes. They were unhelpful at best; some were downright rude.

As I was telling her this I switched on the left turn signal to get in line for the upcoming traffic light. The driver to my left saw my blinking light, braked and graciously allowed me to pull in front of him. He totally contradicted everything I had just been saying. He was the first to cut me some slack. As I looked in my side view mirror at this kind driver's car I immediately saw the Minnesota license plates. It made me feel proud about what we call "Minnesota Nice".

It's not that there are not kind folks in every state, but overall, do you think people are nicer or nastier than they used to be? If you compare the way most people behave today to one or two or thirty years ago are people kinder or not so kind? How about Christians? *US News and World Report* says the percentage of Americans who think incivility is a serious problem is 89%. Those who think mean-spirited political campaigns are to blame are 73%. Rock music is to blame according to 67%. Fifty-two percent think talk radio is to blame. But the percentage of those who think their own behavior is uncivil is only 1%.

Just about everyone thinks that Christians are supposed to be nice and kind. Certainly no one would suggest that Christians are supposed to be nasty and unkind. But, even though we assume "Christian Nice" is the way we're supposed to

be, let's check out what the Bible says about being nice.

In Colossians 3:12 we read, "*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*" So, when getting dressed in the morning, put on kindness. When applying makeup, brush on a mixture of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Most of us think through what we're going to wear and how we want others to see us. We need to anticipate what is going to happen during the day and how we can be nice and kind. Plan ahead.

Galatians 5:22-23 tells us, "*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.*" Kindness is not the only flavor in the fruit basket of a Spirit-filled life but it is central in the list of flavors for spiritually fruitful Christians.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:15 we read, "*Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.*" Sometimes kindness is heroic and sometimes it is routine, but always kindness is the way Christians should respond even when other people commit wrongs against us. It's who Christians are. It's what we do.

In Romans 12:2 we are told, "*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*"

There are two different patterns we can follow: the world's pattern or God's pattern. If we get our thinking straight and spiritual we will follow God's pattern for living and do things God's way.

What does God's pattern look like? It's described in Romans 12:10-17:

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking

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in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.

Whoa! What's the world's pattern that we're not supposed to follow? Actually, we're not directly told. When you buy a pattern to make a dress or a map to go on a trip you don't need or want a wrong pattern or a wrong map. All you need is the right one. So, here in Romans 12 we are told the kind way that Christians behave:

** Be devoted to others—that's nice.*

** Honor others and show respect—that's nice.*

** Pray for other people—that's nice.*

** Invite other people to your home, especially strangers—that's nice, too.*

** Bless people who make your life miserable—that's really nice.*

** Rejoice with those who rejoice; be happy for others when life goes well—that's nice.*

** Mourn with those who mourn; be sad for others when they suffer—that's nice.*

** Be humble. Never be proud or conceited or arrogant. Don't kiss up and kick down. Be nice to those who are lower than you are on the ladder of life.*

The Bible has a priority list on kindness and niceness. As Christians, we should be nicest to people who are poor. Proverbs 19:17 says, "*He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done.*" In Proverbs 31:20, that amazing description of the virtuous and noble woman, it says, "*She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.*" Are you going to throw a party? Jesus says in Luke 14:13-14, "*. . . when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame,*

the blind, and you will be blessed." In other words, invite the people least likely to get an invitation to a party.

The goal is to be kind to everyone, but the priority for a Christian is always to be kind to those who have less than we do. Maybe that's what Romans 12:2 is talking about in comparing the pattern of the world and the pattern of Christians. The natural way to behave is to be nice to those who are above us—to the boss, to rich people, to powerful people, to important people, to people we want to be nice to us. Of course, that is good. But, a distinctive mark of Christians is that we are nice to poor people—that is, to anyone with less than we have. In other words, we are nice to employees, to weaker people, to unimportant people and to people who may or may not be nice to us. That is the Christian way.

But what if we mess up? What if we fail? One time or another every Christian is unkind, impolite or otherwise not so nice. What happens then?

When this happens, ask God for help. When this happens apologize to the person who experienced our cruelty. When this happens, resolve to do better next time. The whole point of Romans 12 is that we aren't always kind but we are always in the process of renewing our minds and becoming more like Jesus. This is expressed in Romans 12:2, "*. . . be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is.*"

Okay, that's what the Bible says about being nice. But what does Christian "nice and kind" actually look like? For one thing, niceness and kindness are pretty much the same things. We are to be kind like Jesus. Jesus was kind to people who were familiar with cruelty. Jesus talked to and touched lepers even though lepers were supposed to keep their distance. He welcomed outcasts like tax collectors and prostitutes into his circle of friends even though they were despised by many in the culture. He fed hungry people, defended poor people, healed sick people and wept for dead people. Not that he was weak or naïve. To the contrary, he was strong and sophisticated. That's the whole point. Jesus used his strength to be kind to others.

Jesus was especially kind when he was wronged. I find it easiest to be nice to those who

are nice to me. Frankly, there's nothing special about being nice to nice people and kind to kind people. The test of Christian kindness is when others are nasty, mean and cruel. *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Do not repay anyone evil for evil."*

When people are unkind to me my defenses immediately go up. I want to retaliate and get even. I have to pray about this. I need to think about it. I want to be kind when wronged because that's what Christians are supposed to do.

Jesus was kind in humility, too. Humility is letting others go first even if they belong at the end of the line. Humility is reluctance to brag and self-promote. Humility is celebrating the success of others without trying to look good in the process. Humility is nice. Humility is kind. In the words of Philippians 2:3-5:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

Here is a list of ways we can be kind (sort of a "Christian Nice" catalog):

- * Hold the door for someone else.*
- * Talk to someone who is ignored by others.*
- * Pay for the person behind you in line. (A Seattle coffee shop reports someone who did this and it was repeated by every driver for 2½ hours.)*
- * Give an unexpected tip. (Our family often went to the same fast food restaurant on Sundays and were served by the same woman. One Sunday I thanked her and handed her a twenty dollar bill. She came over to our table, said it was too much,*

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thanked us and told us it was her last day on the job there.)

** Smile and choose not to be irritated with people whose cell phones ring in theaters, those whose babies cry on airplanes or those who have too many coupons in the grocery store check out line.*

** Be polite to unsolicited telephone callers and thank them for calling.*

** Shovel your neighbor's sidewalk and don't say who did it.*

** Pray for the occupants of every ambulance when you hear a siren or see the lights.*

** Speak with warmth and respect to the person who expresses different political views.*

** Avoid unkind humor.*

** A church in Ohio sponsors free car washes for the community, provides free Christmas present wrapping every year at the mall and gives away tens of thousands of cans of free soda pop at Cincinnati Reds games (with the name of other churches in town instead of the name of their church on the cans.).*

If you're a baseball fan you probably know the name of Hall-of-Famer Wade Boggs who played third baseman for the Boston Red Sox. There's a story about Boggs that claims he hated playing at Yankee Stadium, not because of the Yankees but because of an obnoxious fan with a box seat close to the field. He pummeled Boggs with a barrage of insults and obscenities when he was on the field. The New York fan became a master at irritating Wade Boggs.

One time the verbal assaults began during the pre-game practice. He was vicious and relentless until Boggs had to do something. He walked over to the edge of the field. He talked directly to his abuser, asking if he was the one who was always yelling at him. The fan said he was. Boggs pulled out a brand new baseball, autographed it and gave it to his antagonist. Then he returned to the field.

They say he never shouted at Boggs again. To the contrary, he became one of Wade Boggs' strongest fans at Yankee stadium.

That was really nice. That was kind, like Jesus. That's the sort of thing Jesus might do. That's the sort of thing a Christian does. That's the kind of thing we want to do.

Remember 1 Thessalonians 5:15: *"Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else."*

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