

There is a story told in that familiar form. It seems a minister, a dedicated eagle scout, and the nation's top computer executive were the only passengers on a small plane. The pilot came back to report to them that the plane engine had died, thus the plane was going to go down. "Also" he said taking one of the parachutes, "There are only three parachutes and I am taking one because I have a wife and 3 young children at home." With that statement, he jumped. The computer executive moving quickly said, "I should have one because many consider me the smartest man in the world and the world will need me." With that he grabbed a pack and jumped. The minister then turned to the boy eagle scout and said with a kind face and sad smile, "You are young and I have lived a good life. You take the last parachute, while I go down with the plane." To which the eagle scout responded, "Relax Reverend. The smartest man in the world picked up my backpack and jumped off the plane so we each have one."

Now I know that is only a funny fictitious story, but what I like about it is the way it portrays a person who exhibits kindness. It is always nice to hear about an act of kindness being rewarded since too often we hear of people living so selfishly. Kindness to many, is an inconvenient way of living. Being kind can carry a cost which many people are not prepared to pay. To them, kindness is too time-consuming, too demanding, or too likely to interfere with cherished personal plans.

In the life of the Christian, kindness is not an inconvenience to be avoided, but rather a characteristic to be embraced. In the list of the fruits of the spirit found in Galatians chapter 5, kindness sits in the middle and is an aspect of the Christian life which we should seek after.

In today's text from Ephesians, Paul speaks about many things including forgiveness of sin, God's mercy, God's grace, and the aspect of kindness seen in Jesus Christ.

When we read the Gospels, we often see stories of Jesus looking with sympathy and compassion upon persons who need healing. Jesus then moves into action since kindness is a primary way in which we see Jesus live. We therefore, need to see it as something we should embrace.

So how do we go about fulfilling this need to live with kindness in our lives as well? Well I would say there are three attitudes we need to seek after. They are sympathy, benevolence and generosity.

Now in developing and cultivating feelings of sympathy, it is helpful to remember how we might feel in a given situation. We should try to get into another person's shoes and see it from their perspective. Sometimes this is easy because we have gone through a similar experience in our life history. Thus we can relate to how they feel at the time. Or maybe we know a friend who has been through this and we can empathize.

But note that while it may be easy, too often we forget to be sympathetic to the person in the situation. Maybe we dismiss what they are going through thinking, "*Oh, I got through it; they'll get over it too.*" Or we look at the struggles someone is going through remembering our own experience, then promptly consign their concern with words like, "*Oh, later in retrospect, this won't be a big thing.*"

While those statements may be somewhat true, they lack sympathy and are not really kind words at the time. For instance, I want to relay a story a pastor tells about a discussion he and his son had a few months back when his son broke up with a girl he had dated a few times. The pastor said to his son, "*Why should a young man like you worry about a girl who doesn't want to date anymore? There are plenty more fish in the sea.*"

But the son was not impressed with Dad's words. He pointed out that he wasn't interested in fishing at the present time; therefore the number of fish in the sea was not particularly relevant. Then the son added, "Didn't you ever find yourself let down by someone you cared about?"

The pastor father then said he was somewhat humbled, digging deep into the mists of memory. He recalled a similar experience from his youth that had not only healed, but hadn't even left a scar. Yet in his memory, he had to admit that it did hurt as he went through it. The pastor went on to say he realized that he should have been more sympathetic by taking the time to realize what the other person is feeling.

Sometimes sympathy is achieved by recollection, but sometimes it takes imagination. We cannot always have an experience to go back on, but that does not mean we do not have to try to sense what a person is feeling and develop some sympathy for what they are going through.

Along with sympathy, benevolence is important for living life with kindness.

Now benevolence may be a big word to some of you, and often the only place you hear the word is in church. I know the first time I came across the word it was at my home church in Vandergrift, when it was listed on the offering envelopes I received at confirmation. There was, regular budget, building fund, and benevolences. I understood the first 2, but had to ask what is benevolences?

It was explained that this is second mile giving. It was giving that went beyond what we normally give. It was giving that should be done when we get money that wasn't expected, like birthday money. Then benevolences became money that went toward mission funds and other important projects to help other people.

Well, I understand now benevolence is more than just money. It is helping other people when it may not be convenient. Jesus described it as going the second mile. If someone wants and needs you to walk one mile with them, go with them two. It is an action that you do that is beyond the call of duty. It is going beyond what may be considered the usual care, to giving something a little more.

That going the extra mile is a choice. We do the action, not because a person asks, but because we wanted to and felt the desire to do so. Normally such actions are greatly appreciated as one realizes how kind it is of a person to do such.

Now benevolence is a choice; Generosity, the third aspect of kindness, is that which takes a chance. For you see, there is always the chance that for those to whom generosity is extended, they'll milk the one being generous. How many times have we heard about people who take a generous gift, and waste it. One of the aggravating aspects of the welfare system is not that it is a generous system. For those who need welfare assistance, most Americans are truly happy to be helping them with that system.

But the problem Americans have with the welfare system is the dependency it has created. Instead of being seen as a system of *temporary* help, it is seen as a right of what is owed to a person. This was not the intention, yet this is what has transpired with the action of generosity shown by our government.

Generosity takes a chance. It is the hope of a generous person that a person will feel loved and helped. That is what we do in the Thanksgiving and Christmas season when we extend a generous hand to help another person. We are hoping that our generosity will pick another person up and let them feel good about themselves. We hope the person will feel loved.

It is why we take up offerings to help after natural disasters, or send food to families when they are having some issue of life. We hope to express through our generosity that we care.

Being generous at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and throughout the year are ways that we do acts of kindness. But recognize that generous actions involve taking a chance, because there are people who receive gifts and exploit them. Or some people may seem ungrateful. Nonetheless, we are still called to be generous because there are many who will be grateful. Many will get the message that someone does care. Those people will be picked up by your generosity. Kindness is an effort, and it is worth it.

In the fellowship of believers, kindness is one of the most effective ways to show another person that God cares and we care. Nothing in our world is more winsome than the loving kindness shown to another as we reach out in genuine sympathy to the forlorn.

Being kind regardless of personal cost, generously communicates the reality of a God Who loves us and sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. As we continue to live and prepare for the holidays coming up and all the other activities in our busy schedules, let us go forth remembering the God whose loving-kindness extended to all the world through the gift of His Son.