Kindness Is Not Nice: Christ’s Mandate for Leaders to Be Kind, in Light of the Sacred Heart of God

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When people attempt to articulate the characteristics of a strong leader, kindness is often overlooked as a necessary and desirable trait. The misguided notions have about kindness can account for a collective uneasiness with discussing it alongside traits such as honesty and courage and love. This paper explores the true nature of kindness as it is exhibited by God to mankind, modeled by Christ, and described by Paul. These descriptions are applied to the principle of the sacred heart of Christ, and concludes with a descriptive challenge of the radical and fearless kindness that must begin to flow from the open heart of every leader who claims to love and follow Christ.

It is human nature (at least fallen human nature) to be suspicious of anyone who seems to be too nice. One automatically begins to wonder what very nice people want, or what is wrong with them. Thus, it is troubling to know what to do with the Christian’s mandate for leaders to be kind, first by Jesus (Mt. 5:43-48) and then by Paul (Eph. 4:31-32). After all, did not Jesus anger the Pharisees (Mt. 3:7; 9:11,14; 34; 12:2, 14, 24), use a whip to drive out merchants in the Temple (Mt. 21:12-13), and say “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt. 10:34 ESV)? How can one be both kind and brave and strong? Perhaps contemporary misunderstanding of the theology of kindness has led to an ignorance of one of the most radical and courageous traits a leader can possess.

Unlike the more nebulous word, “charity,” kindness is inherently descriptive; it demands that others be viewed and treated in a specific manner - but it may not be the manner that it is assumed to be. This paper examines the nature of kindness in Scripture, its theological basis upon the recorded heart and actions of God, and how it fleshed out in the life of Jesus and the writings of Paul. An application of kindness will be illustrated in the principle of the Sacred Heart of Christ, which will lead to a challenge to all followers of Jesus who hope to lead others.

Kindness vs. "Niceness"

It is a great tragedy for kindness that it is often mistaken for niceness. The concept of “niceness” in English has several connotations. Merriam-Webster online (2011) defines nice as “obsolete; showing fastidious or finicky tastes: (e.g. ‘too nice a palate to enjoy junk food?’); exacting in
requirements or standards; possessing, marked by, or demanding great or excessive precision and delicacy; … fitting; appropriate; socially acceptable, polite, kind.” This conjures images of a straight-laced perfectionism that imposes excessive, high social demands on others, in exchange for being perpetually polite and congenial. No wonder “nice” people make everyone else feel uncomfortable. Thursten (1987) described the general aversion for such characters in this way: “Most of us have trouble loving a perfectionist. He or she has achieved a state of being too rarefied for us. Perfectionism is out of fashion. We tend to think of it as a sort of psychological illness with compulsive behavior as its first cousin and ‘nasty niceness’ as its great aunt” (p. 170). Because they imagine “kindness” as interchangeable with “niceness,” people imagine kindness as a sweet-smelling weakness that cannot be trusted among followers or tolerated in leaders.

Willimon (2003) shared that a colleague said, “[people in a certain denomination] have one theological conviction: God is nice. This is followed by an ethical corollary: We ought to be nice too” (p. 62). But is being nice the same as being kind? Merriam-Webster online (2011) defined kind as “affectionate, loving; of a sympathetic or helpful nature; of a forbearing nature; gentle; arising from or characterized by sympathy or forbearance; to give pleasure or relief.” Although the veneer of niceness may appear similar to kindness in its absence of hostility, it is apparent that kindness is motivated by more than social propriety. It exudes from a gentle, forbearing, or sympathetic nature, a heart of compassion. The definitions of “kindness” in Scripture confirm this description.

The Kindness of God

Kindness permeates the entire Bible, and although people are described as showing kindness (1 Samuel 20:14-15; Ruth 3:10; Esther 2:9; Acts 28:2), most frequently kindness is described as an attribute of God. According to Strong (1996), the most common term used for “kindness” in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word, hesed (חֵסֶד) which translated means “goodness, kindness, faithfulness.” In King James, hesed is translated as “mercy” 149 times, “kindness” 40 times, “lovingkindness” 30 times, and “goodness” 12 times. It is also occasionally translated as “kindly,” “merciful,” “favour,” “good,” “goodliness,” and “pity.” When God has the opportunity to describe what He is like in the Old Testament, He declares Himself to possess hesed. For example:

The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in [hesed] and faithfulness, keeping [hesed] for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Exodus 4:6-7 ESV).

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and [hesed] with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations (Deuteronomy 7:9 ESV).

God was expected to act toward people, not based on their own merit, but based upon His own name, because of His kind nature: “But you, O GOD my Lord, deal on my behalf for your name’s sake; because your [hesed] is good, deliver me! Help me, O LORD my God! Save me according to your [hesed] (Psalm 109: 21, 26 ESV). Perhaps the most intriguing use of the word hesed is found in Psalm 117:2: “For his [hesed] is great toward us” (Psalm 117:2 KJV).
impact of the repetition of *hesed* (הֵסֵד) in Psalm 117:2 is lost in the English translations. KJV translates the repeated word here “merciful kindness,” and in almost every case every case (including all of the passages above), *hesed* is translated “steadfast love” in ESV. While linguistically these terms may give contemporary readers a closer understanding of the original intent than “kindness” due to the evolution of perceived meanings as previously discussed, the emphatic stressing of the impact of God’s kindness – the faithful compassion despite humanity’s treatment of Him – is literally lost somewhere in translation.

In the New Testament, the two most commonly used words for kindness are *chrēstos* (χρήστος) and *chrēstotēs* (χρηστοτης). *Chrēstos* is translated “fit for use, useful; virtuous, good; mild (as opposed to harsh, hard sharp, bitter)...kind, benevolent” (Strong, 1998). It is translated as kind, easy, better, goodness, good, and gracious in KJV. *Chrēstotēs* is derived from *chrēstos*, and is used more frequently. It is translated as “moral goodness, integrity, kindness” (Strong, 1996), and is translated “goodness,” “kindness,” “good,” and “gentleness.” The New Testament concept of kindness describes God’s motivation for acting the way He does toward those who believe in Him, and our intended motivation for repentance: “Or do you presume on the riches of his *chrēstotes* and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s *chrēstos* is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4 ESV). Further, the New Testament kindness of God is demonstrated through His gift of Jesus Christ:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in [*chrēstotes*] toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:7 ESV)

But when the [*chrēstotes*] and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior (Titus 3:4-6 ESV)

And Christ, who is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3a ESV), further demonstrates the strength and power of the kindness of God, taking the definition further and making it more personal, as the next section will illustrate.

**The Kindness of Jesus**

Baxter (1770) said, “Study God’s love as manifested in Christ; then you shall see what Man on Earth may see. But think not falsely, narrowly, basely of his Office, his performance or his Covenant” (p. 930). Christ was not “nice.” He was not “tame,” but he was kind. Jesus was kind enough to humble himself and take on the nature of a servant, and serve unto death on a cross (Philippians 2). He was kind enough to help those who were blind receive their sight (Luke 4:18; 7:21-22), and kind enough to confront those who claimed to see. Jesus loved them enough to tell them they were blind, even though he knew they did not want to hear it (John 9:39-41). Jesus was kind enough to allow a prostitute to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair, while he reclined at the home of an offended Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50). He was kind enough to care that the holy Temple was being desecrated by people who were robbing vulnerable people
coming to sacrifice and worship from distant towns (Mathew 21:12-13), kind enough to take action (with a whip, even) to clear out an entire market of charlatans that ignored God and dehumanized His worshipers, and then simply begin ministering and healing people again (Matthew 21: 14-16). Jesus was socially unacceptable. He was by definition not concerned about being nice, because he was too busy being kind.

Christ’s admonition in Matthew 5:43-48 is a powerful rebuke to leaders who believe that Jesus came to make people nice:

43 You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (ESV)

Christ’s description of how one ought to relate to others begins with an assumption that we have enemies – which directly implies that we have been or done something controversial enough for others to oppose. Willimon (2003) stated that one of the greatest challenges to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:43-48 is that some have worked so hard at being nice that they have become bland and benign. They are so uninteresting that they have no enemies to love, “so, rather than have the opportunity obediently to love our enemies, all we can do is to be nice to the world that, sensing no threat in us, has been relatively nice to us” (p. 62). Christ’s kindness is not safe. It is offensive and defies common sense (Blomberg, 2004). It is excessive to the carnal mind, especially for leaders, because it reaches beyond those who already love them, and touches those who hate them. It feels too risky.

The challenge to the Spirit-filled believer is a command to bravely greet and extend loving treatment to people who have been hurtful and offensive, people who are not safe. For a leader, this is a challenging proposal; unsafe people surround leaders. Leadership is dangerous, because people are rarely able to see the leader as a human being (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Instead, the leader is viewed as the embodiment of followers’ hopes and fears. Leaders are often consequently treated as a threat when they are working the hardest to do the most good. This can be demoralizing and disorienting. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) explained why this is:

You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, people will see with equal passion the losses you are asking them to sustain. (p. 12)

Thus, a leader may be completely dedicated to the success, healing, restoration, or growth of an organization or an individual, while the very people he or she is trying to serve and help are attacking the leader personally on any number of fronts.

When the leader’s humanity has been erased by the people who are opposing him or her, people who challenge the leader are capable of doing profoundly damaging things that they would never consider doing to a human being. It is easy to be kind to people who follow with great support, as Jesus said in Matthew 5. But it takes supernatural strength to be kind – not nice, but truly kind
to people who position themselves as enemies and attempt to destroy a leader’s credibility, reputation, relationships, or authority. In fact, if it were not for the wily group of fishermen, tax collectors, and zealots who followed Jesus even after his death, one might be tempted to believe that this mandate of kindness is impossible. But it is not impossible; Jesus lived his life as a kind man, though slandered and ridiculed and rejected. In so doing, Jesus demonstrated kindness in order to pursue the ultimate restoration and reconciliation of the other person, who has been purchased with his own blood. Christ’s kindness reflects the heart of God the Father (Nelson, 1992), and according to Paul, all believers are called to reflect the heart of Christ (Philippians 2:1-5).

The Kindness of Paul

The Apostle Paul, too, was adventurously kind. His kindness emboldened him to advocate for the Gentiles’ equal access to God through salvation in Christ, despite its social unacceptability among many Jews (Galatians 2:11-21). Paul spoke of kindness many times in the context of God’s character (Romans 2:4, 11:22; Ephesians 2:7; Titus 3:4) and the believer’s responsibility to and for one another (Galatians 5:22; Colossians 3:12), but 2 Corinthians 6:3-11 epitomizes what kindness looks like fleshed out in real relationships for a leader who is trying to instigate and perpetuate radical but necessary change.

Endurance in Affliction (vv. 3-6)

Paul’s life provides a vivid illustration of how far a leader’s opponents can go if they feel threatened enough. Paul and his team encountered physical abuse and painful circumstances, yet they did all they could to avoid doing anything that would “put an obstacle in anyone’s way” (v. 3). But while being mistreated, they disciplined themselves not to treat anyone in such a way that would hinder them from seeing Christ in their lives. Instead, they humanized even those who mistreated them, and commended themselves to God as his servants in every circumstance. Paul and his team never became hostile to those who persecuted them. It is difficult to imagine the level of Holy Spirit empowerment that they would have needed in order to endure all of these hardships “by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love” (ESV, emphasis added).

Genuine love, patience, and kindness – all for people who were causing all manner of hardships for them demonstrates two things: (a) Without being hostile, Paul was making enemies because he was attempting to lead others into new, holy but unfamiliar territory, and (b) he was determined to genuinely love his enemies. This is the dual radical nature of biblical kindness. It tells the truth, but it refuses to be hostile and even extends love to those who cannot stomach what must be said and done. When one imagines how this approach to leadership would translate into one’s current circumstances, it becomes nearly unfathomable how brave this level of kindness really is.

Consider Paul and Silas’ treatment of the jailer in Acts 16:23-36. The jailer was charged with guarding them after they had been beaten – yet they treated him with dignity and compassion. They prevented him from committing suicide (v. 28) and led him and his family to Christ (vv. 29-32). In return, the jailer poured kindness out upon them (vv. 33-34), bringing them to his
house, washing their wounds, and feeding them. In the midst of this scene, Paul and Silas baptized the man at his home, and his entire family believed in Christ (v. 34).

**Speaking the Truth and Walking in Divine Empowerment (vv. 7-10)**

7 by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything (ESV, emphasis added).

Paul encountered slander from within the church (1-2 Corinthians; Galatians), slander from the pagans (Acts 16:19-24) and from Israeli nationalists (Acts 17:5-9, 13; 18: 12-17). Yet, no matter how people attempted to ruin his reputation or strip him of his authority in the churches he had planted, he boldly proclaimed the truth without hostility. He waged truth by living a holy life (v. 7). Paul lived in a constant tension of having all the responsibilities of a leader, with none of the expected benefits. His life epitomized Heifetz and Linsky’s (2002) description of the adaptive leader who is perceived and treated as a threat, even when he had the best interests of the followers at heart. Yet Paul remained kind. He fearlessly loved his spiritual children enough to tell them what they needed to hear instead of what they wanted to hear, knowing he was able to do so - and was mandated by Christ to do so – because Paul loved them as their father:

14 I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 15 For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

16 I urge you, then, be imitators of me (1 Corinthians 4:14-16 ESV).

Not everyone has the right to speak as bluntly to their followers as Paul did with the congregations in his care. Many have misunderstood the boldness in Paul’s epistles because they do not read in the context of Paul’s intimate, selflessly loving father relationship with these people. As Paul said, “…you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel…. (v.15 ESV, emphasis added).

Divorced from the framework of relationship, Paul seems cold in his treatment of congregations under his care (Galatians 3:1; 1 Corinthians 3:1-3); , but Paul was exhibiting profound kindness that demonstrates a deep and abiding love for his children. As their father, he was kind enough to tell them the truth, even when it hurt (Galatians 4:18-20).

**Kindness and the Sacred Heart**

The concept of the Sacred Heart is foreign to many who are not from a Catholic or Orthodox tradition, but the foundational principle of the Sacred Heart of Christ is a beautiful illustration of what Christ has called leaders to maintain in order to wage kindness as a lifestyle. Saint Augustine (as cited in Gougaud, 1927) stated, “The Evangelist…did not say that the soldier struck or wounded the side of Christ…but he said that he ‘opened’ it. Thus, in a certain manner, the door of life was opened to us, through which come all the sacraments of the Church…” (pp. 106-107). Essentially, Christ lived and even died with his arms and his heart wide open. His kindness flowed freely from a heart that refused to shut itself away for self-preservation. Christ’s heart remained sacred, raw, and naked. Heifetz (2002) described the message of the Sacred Heart as:
... the willingness to feel everything, everything, to hold it all without letting go of your work…. To cry out like King David in the wilderness, just when you desperately want to believe that you’re doing the right thing, that your sacrifice means something, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ But in nearly the same instant, to feel compassion, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ Jesus remained open. (pp. 229-230)

This is a bold and frightening endeavor. It is counter-intuitive to keep one’s arms open wide in death, and even in the midst of crisis and betrayal to refuse to lose one’s innocence and sense of wonder and hope and gentle care for people. This is the call of kindness upon leaders who wish to follow Jesus.

Kindness Flowing From God's Sacred Heart

Although the Sacred Heart – the steady determination to remain open and vulnerable and transparent, to extend unfeigned, un-embittered, unprotected love to others despite the response and capacity of the recipients - is epitomized in the life and death of Christ, its biblical origins extend throughout the Old Testament. Jesus said,

19…Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. 20For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. (John 5:19-20a ESV)

The Sacred Heart of God is seen from the very beginning. His Sacred Heart had planned to send Christ as Savior to restore the human race back into relationship with Him, before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:3-8). When Adam and Eve sinned and separated mankind from their Creator, He covered their nakedness and shame (Genesis 3:21), and guarded the way to the Tree of Life, which would have kept Adam and Eve permanently alive in their sinful condition (Genesis 3:22-24). When people reached almost complete depravity, His Sacred Heart led Him to shorten their years to minimize the depravity they could achieve (Genesis 6:1-3) and kept Him from destroying the entire human race (Genesis 6:5-8).

God’s own Sacred Heart caused Him to call out a people to show His love to the other nations so the estranged peoples of the earth could be called back to God (Genesis 12; Isaiah 56:3-8), but His kindness was not limited to the descendants of Abraham. He called Jonah to warn the evil city of Nineveh because His Sacred Heart was filled with compassion for people He had lovingly created that had fallen so far that they now possessed no moral compass. When Jonah was enraged that God was merciful to them, the Lord rebuked him and asked, “…should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle” (Jonah 4:10-11 ESV)? Despite their horrific and destructive sin, His Sacred Heart remained raw and openly engaged with them. He provided the rebuke they needed through a reluctant prophet (Jonah 1-2), gave them the capacity to repent (Jonah 3:1-9), and then relented on his plan to destroy the city (Jonah 3:10). The Ninevites were not moral people, yet God extended mercy to them in their pathetic state.

Israel, too, was the recipient of the mercies that flowed from the Sacred Heart of God. The book of Hosea is a living testimony of one prophet’s calling to remain a faithful and loving husband to a prostitute, as an example of God’s faithful heart to Israel. After their adulterous worship of other gods, the Lord brought them home again (Hosea 2:16, 20, 23). The picture here of a
ravaged, road-hardened prostitute being purchased out of slavery and brought back home as a beloved wife by a faithful, broken-hearted and yet unsullied husband provides a glimpse of the Sacred Heart of God. Hosea took his wife home and covered her nakedness, treated her as a lady, and laid his heart wide open. Because God refused to close His heart to people, He consistently demonstrated overwhelming compassion and faithful love – restoring people into relationship with Himself who could never have been restored on their own merit.

The Father’s Sacred Heart Demonstrated in the Incarnation

The incarnation itself is the ultimate demonstration of open, freely flowing Sacred Heart of God, who opened Himself and gave His own dear son to eternally bridge the relational gap between broken, unsafe humans and Himself, while people were utterly incapable of loving him in return:

1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

(Ephesians 2:1-7, emphasis added)

The riches of God the Father’s grace in kindness are expressed in and through the Person and work of Christ Jesus. God knew that people had no capacity to restore their relationship with Him, no ability to do anything but grieve Him. All people were “by nature children of wrath” (v. 3), born into enmity with Him. Yet while they were in this condition, He sent Christ into their midst – not to condemn them, but to save them (John 3:16-17). No wonder the Word of God incarnate operated (and continues to operate) from a consciously, freely open and vulnerable heart. The Sacred Heart of Christ was inherited from His Father. And since Paul was determined to “know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and [sharing] his sufferings [that he may become] like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10 ESV), the Sacred Heart flowed into Paul’s heart as well.

The Sacred Heart of Paul

Like Christ, the Apostle Paul made a conscious decision to live his life with his heart on the line. He loved others enough to speak freely what no one else was willing to be said, for the benefit of the gospel and every member of the Body of Christ, no matter how offensive the truth may be to people who could punish him. He went toe-to-toe with the Twelve and defended Titus’ right not to be circumcised as a Gentile believer (Galatians 2:1-5), and confronted Peter for refusing to eat with Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-14). He rebuked his own children in the faith when they drifted from the gospel in belief or practice (1 Corinthians 1-14; Galatians 2-3). Paul abandoned himself to loving people enough to defend the gospel’s purity and accessibility because kindness flowed from his embrace of the Sacred Heart. This pericope demonstrates bold openness of heart that marked Paul’s entire ministry:
9 For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. 10 We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we are in disrepute. 11 To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, 12 and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; 13 when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. (1 Corinthians 4:9-13 ESV)

Despite everything Paul and his team had endured from immature and errant people in their care, they did not abandon the carnal believers he loved. “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open” (v.11). Paul committed to them an open heart, knowing full well that it would be broken by these whom he loved so dearly. Despite the risks, Paul refused to close off his heart to the Corinthians. “You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also” (vv. 12-13 ESV). Most leaders feel compelled to restrict their open hearts to people who are receptive to them. But no matter how badly he was hurt in the process, Paul was determined never to close off his heart from those he was trying to shepherd, and he longed to see them learn how to “widen [their] hearts also.” His heart remained open, hoping for the simple chance that some may be touched and changed.

Christ’s Invitation to Embrace the Kindness that Flows from the Sacred Heart

Under the right circumstances, anyone can be nice to an irritating or hostile person. To show kindness – true and genuine, vulnerable love flowing freely from an open heart – is a supernatural feat. It cannot be produced by human works. Kindness is the natural fruit of walking in the Spirit of God (Galatians 5). It requires an attitude like that of Paul, whose hunger to know Christ produced a desire to share Christ’s pain and willingness to remain open (Philippians 3:10). This invitation to fellowship in the transforming sufferings of Christ in order to gain his heart for others was not extended exclusively to Paul. Suso (1366, as cited in Gougaud, 1927) recorded Christ’s invitation to immerse wholly into the Sacred Heart of Christ:

Thou must enter through my open side into my Heart, wounded in love, and thou must shut thyself in; thou must search for a resting-place there, and there must thou stay. Then will I purify thee in the living water and I will colour thee red with my blood; I will bind thee to me, and I will join thee to me in all eternity. (p. 96)

If one wants to become kind, he or she must cease to see anything that Christ chose to do as what he did simply because he was God. Jesus laid aside his rights to use his Godhood as something to be grasped at and took on the form of a servant (Philippians 2). He had no shortcuts to make his suffering easier. Although horrific, Christ’s death was not a tragedy; it was a love gift from the open heart of God (Romans 6:23), a gift that flowed freely from the open heart of his dear Son from the beginning of his life until he laid it down (John 15:13).

Christ invites every leader who longs to become genuinely kind to enter into his open, wounded Heart and become shut in, identifying fully with His painful, steadfast commitment to remain open and engaged. Anyone willing to let Christ’s shared pain do its transforming work will emerge with new eyes for others, new compassion, new willingness to remain open even with the assurance of betrayal and hostility.
Baxter (1707) provided further encouragement to allow Christ to form in each believer the heart that allows itself to remain open even when wounded. “Consider that the person you are angry with is either a Child of God, or of the Devil, and one that must live either in Heaven or Hell” (p. 764). If the person who is opposing you is God’s child, Baxter challenged, does not your love for your Father and His love for His child, and the fact that this person bears your Father’s image, draw you to a heart of reconciliation? “Will you hate and hurt a member of Christ?” (p. 764). On the other hand, Baxter continued, if your enemy is a wicked person destined for hell (as your anger may easily make you believe), is this person not already in a miserable enough condition as a slave of sin? Will not hell be a long and miserable enough punishment for your enemy? Why would you wish for your enemy to be tormented before the time? Either way, exhorts Baxter (1707), in the light of God’s treatment of those who believe, compassion is the only appropriate response for an enemy who positions himself or herself against a Spirit-filled leader.

Conclusion

A Spirit-filled leader cannot afford to ignore God’s mandate to be kind, any more than he or she is capable of being kind without Divine empowerment. While “niceness” is possible in the natural realm, it flows from a desire to conform to social expectations. Kindness operates in another universe. It is radical, offensive, surprising, disarming, and impossible without the help of the Holy Spirit. This paper demonstrated the true nature of kindness as it is flows from the heart of God to His creation, ultimately incarnated and demonstrated by Christ, and described and reflected by Paul and his writings. Finally, kindness is expressed in examining the Sacred Heart, a heart that refuses to become calloused and cynical, a heart that remains open and loving, even to followers who position themselves as enemies.

The Sacred Heart of God enabled the Heavenly Father to unflinchingly love His people through generations of rebellion and betrayal. Before the creation of the world and throughout the centuries, the heart of God never closed, even when justice would have demanded it. Ultimately, the Sacred Heart of God was seen in His willingness to let the full weight of His love be poured into a naked and vulnerable child, and then demonstrated in the life, words, death and resurrection of Christ. As the Apostle Paul pursued Christ, the Sacred Heart of Jesus continued to manifest in the life and ministry of Paul and his contemporaries. And now the challenge rests upon this generation.

The great question that leaders must be courageous enough to answer is: for Christ’s sake, will they be brave enough to lead with kindness? The question will likely arise more than once every day. The cocky district manager who publicly mocks the leader is still coming to the executive meeting tomorrow. The elder who has been making phone calls to all the people of influence in the church to attempt to call for the pastor’s resignation will still be sitting third row back, glaring up at the pastor this Sunday. The little side-discussions that presume to know the leader and his or her intentions regarding the decision that did not go well will still find their way just inside earshot next week. Leaders will never be safe. Will they refuse to lose the wonderment and innocence that made them willing to throw open their hearts with raw authenticity and lead in the beginning? Or will they grow polished and civil on the outside, but cold and cynical within, just to survive the bullet-spray? One subtle decision at a time, may the radical kindness of God in Christ teach each leader to wage kindness, and never settle for being nice.
About the Author

MaryJo Burchard, Assistant Director for Kings County at Fresno Pacific University, currently serves as adjunct faculty in the Organizational Leadership B.A. completion program at Fresno Pacific University, where she earned her M.A. in Leadership and Organizational Studies. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Organizational Leadership with an emphasis in Ecclesial Leadership from Regent University. A pastor’s daughter herself, she met her husband, Kenny, while teaching English and ministering in Japan. Together they have served in pastoral ministry for more than 15 years. She has conducted children’s ministry workshops, training, and consultations for Christian leaders at both local and district levels for Foursquare and Slavic Baptist churches, and has led trainings and inter-generational outreaches in the Marshall Islands, Mexico, England, Taiwan, Japan, and in local communities. MaryJo is the Children’s Ministry Director at the church that she helped her husband plant ten years ago. Her passion is to help the church mentor and develop godly servant-leaders in every generation.

References


