

## “In Defense of Kindness: Why Kindness Needs Defending”

Philippians 2:1-5

It seems like every few months we are bombarded with news of a new virus threatening to upend our lives. Most recently, we heard anxious reports about a Hantavirus outbreak on a cruise ship. Even though health experts repeatedly assured us that the general risk was incredibly low, fear took the driver's seat. Our news feeds and social media algorithms instantly capitalized on our most basic human instinct: survival.

But there is another kind of contagion spreading through our culture today, and it doesn't happen on a cruise ship. It happens on our screens. Social media is often engineered to scare us and divide us. In this environment of heightened fear and polarization, genuine kindness is pushed to the back seat.

In the digital town square, the person who crafts the most sarcastic, cutting, or devastating takedown is rewarded with popularity, clicks, and followers. Even if you and I don't actively participate in those toxic exchanges, we consume them. And slowly, subtly, what we consume changes us. It alters how we perceive our neighbors, and it degrades how we treat one another.

This isn't just an abstract problem happening "out there" on the internet; it is affecting our children and our communities. A couple of weeks ago, a local news article highlighted one family's heartbreaking struggle with bullying. A father stood before the school board in Byron-Bergen, his voice heavy with frustration and grief. He shared how his son had been the target of relentless abuse—culminating in an incident where another student threw a bottle at his head during lunch while others simply stood by, ignoring the behavior.

Think about that. We have more anti-bullying education, more school assemblies, and more awareness campaigns than any generation in history. Yet the problem seems to be growing rather than shrinking. Why? Because our young people are watching the adults. They are modeling their behavior after an adult culture that rewards the disregard of others.

Faced with this reality, our invitation today is to become deeply, radically intentional about kindness in our daily lives.

But let's be clear: this is not a call to just "be nice." There is a profound difference between superficial niceness and biblical kindness. Niceness is about manners, pleasantries, and keeping up appearances. Niceness is good, but it rarely examines the inner motivation of the heart. It is entirely possible to act "nicely" toward someone to their face and then turn around and completely undermine their dignity and well-being behind their back.

Author and pastor Bruce Reyes-Chow defines true kindness this way:

*"Kindness in its purest form is about simply responding to the interests of the person before you."*

This is exactly where the Apostle Paul meets us. Listen to how he calls the church to act for the well-being of others in Philippians 2:1-5:

*"If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."*

At face value, this invitation feels daunting, if not completely impossible. How can we possibly be of the same mind and the same love? We know how difficult unity is. We struggle to achieve it within a single family, let alone an entire church or society. Our differing experiences, politics, and perspectives constantly threaten to tear us apart.

The key to unlocking this divine wisdom is found in verse 5: *"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."*

Paul was writing to a church deeply conditioned by the culture of the Roman Empire. The Philippians lived in a world where "might made right." In the Roman worldview, the rich, the powerful, and the ruthless were viewed as uniquely blessed by the gods. The rest of humanity was destined for a life of submission to the elite. Rome maintained order through violence, fear, and religious manipulation.

Paul steps into that environment and issues a radical challenge: Stop looking at the world through the lens of the Empire. Start looking at the world through the eyes of Jesus.

Following Christ was never meant to be just a comfortable religious identity or a passive belief system. It is a radical movement of the heart. It is a commitment to look past our human divisions and behold the sacred value in every single person. Paul knew that to make the vision of God's kingdom a reality, a collective change of heart had to occur.

We live in a culture comfortable with the logic of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"—a strict system of *tit-for-tat*. If you hurt me, I hurt you. If you cancel me, I cancel you.

But the kindness at the heart of the gospel reminds us that every single life is sacred. Our own spiritual well-being is intimately tied to how we treat others—regardless of how they behave toward us.

Now, defending kindness does not mean we become doormats. Kindness does not mean "anything goes," nor does it mean we abandon healthy boundaries. Rather, kindness means putting God first in

every human encounter. It means refusing to let the hostility of another person dictate the condition of your soul.

Too often, we find ourselves caught in the tension between the world's desire for retaliation and Jesus' invitation to love our enemies. We hesitate because we haven't fully embraced our fundamental unity with one another and with God.

Spiritual maturity doesn't happen overnight; it takes practice. I want to invite you this week to practice kindness in small, intentional increments.

Challenge yourself to dedicate just **one hour each week** where you are explicitly conscious of your interactions. When you are around others during that hour, silence the noise of the world and let your inner teacher—the Holy Spirit—guide you. Ask the simple question: *What can I do right now to contribute to the well-being of the person standing in front of me?*

Let us step out of the culture of fear, step away from the allure of division, and actively defend kindness by living it out.

## **Closing Prayer**

*(Adapted from Thomas Merton)*

Let us pray:

O God, we are one with you. You have made us one with you. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, you dwell in us.

Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts. Help us to realize that there can be no true understanding where there is mutual rejection.

O God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, and completely, we accept you. We thank you, we adore you, and we love you with our whole being—because our being is your being, and our spirit is rooted in your spirit.

Fill us then with love, and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways. Keep us united in this one Spirit which makes you present to the world, and which bears witness to the ultimate reality that is love.

For love has overcome. Love is victorious. Amen.