

“In Defense of Kindness: A Lifelong Practice”
Romans 3:23 and Galatians 5:22-23

We are going to begin today with a quick exercise. I want you to turn to a neighbor, team up, and count off from 1 to 3, taking turns. The first person says “one,” the second says “two,” the third says “three,” and then you loop back around.

Here is the catch: if you make a mistake, you cannot apologize or look embarrassed. Instead, you must immediately high-five each other and say loudly, with genuine joy, “We made a mistake!” You are literally going to cheer for failing.

(Let them try it for a brief moment)

Now, let’s make it a little harder. Instead of saying the number “two,” that person has to say “hey.” Go!

Think about how that felt. What do we normally do when we make a mistake, or when someone else messes up around us? Our instinctual reactions usually range from internal shame to external blame. We feel bad, or we look for someone else to carry the fault.

We spend so much of our lives trying to avoid making mistakes. But in reality, stumbling is an inseparable part of life and growth. If we are to continue to grow in life and in love, mistakes will be made. It is how we handle them that makes all the difference.

The Freedom of Falling Short

Today, we are invited to look at two scriptures that remind us that practicing kindness is not a destination we suddenly arrive at, but a lifelong practice.

The first scripture reminds us that falling short is simply part of the human condition. Let’s listen to **Romans 3:23**:

“Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Growing up, I used to read this verse as a heavy condemnation—a piece of bad news designed to keep us feeling guilty. But over time, I have found it incredibly freeing. It means that making mistakes is part of the human deal. God’s grace is not dependent on our static perfection. It is a given that as we live each day, we are prone to fear, anger, and making the wrong choices. But because God’s grace is ever so close to us, we aren’t left in our mistakes—that grace is what keeps us going, and keeps us growing.

The Metaphor of the Pawpaw Tree

This brings us to our second scripture, which outlines what it looks like when we allow that grace to work through us. We find it in **Galatians 5:22-23**:

"By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."

It is easy to imagine ourselves receiving these beautiful gifts once and for all, like a package dropped on our doorstep. But Paul specifically uses the metaphor of fruit.

Fruit does not appear overnight. It is something that grows slowly, coming into its proper season only when the right conditions are cultivated. Sometimes, even with a farmer's best efforts, a disease takes over a tree for a season, delaying the harvest.

I recently learned about the pawpaw tree when someone shared its sweet, tropical-tasting fruit with me. When I asked how long it takes for a pawpaw tree to actually produce, I was surprised to learn it takes about 5 to 8 years of patient waiting.

What if we approached our commitment to kindness with that kind of long view in mind? Instead of demanding instant fruit from ourselves and others, what if we learned to trust the slow path and the Guide on the journey?

What if—instead of thinking that once we figure out how to be kind, we will always be kind—we approached kindness with humility? A humility that says, "I am willing to get up and try again, even after I stumble."

The Conflict in Galatia: Rules vs. Relationships

To understand why Paul wrote this, we have to look at what was happening on the ground. This letter was sent to Jesus-followers in Galatia, a Roman province in the highlands of modern-day Turkey. The church there was locked in a bitter conflict, largely because a group of legalistic teachers—Paul calls them "agitators"—had arrived.

These teachers told the Galatian believers that following Jesus wasn't enough. They insisted that to be truly safe from the wrath of the Roman Empire and right with God, they had to strictly follow the ancient Law of Moses, eat kosher food, and be circumcised.

In short, they made a massive mistake. They tried to manage their fear of the empire by drawing sharp lines in the sand, focusing heavily on divisions between Jewish and Gentile believers.

But Paul offered them a completely different focus. Instead of obsessing over rules, divisions, and who was making mistakes, he invited them to dwell on the soul virtues

that make such divisions entirely irrelevant. Paul knew firsthand the utter futility of trying to follow rules without focusing on the transforming power of the Spirit of God. Remember, Paul used to be one of those strict legalists—and focusing strictly on the law had landed him in a dark place of hatred and bigotry.

Paul learned that only when we consent to and trust the goodness of God's grace in and around us, are we truly able to know the freedom of that grace. Kindness, as a fruit of the Spirit, is something that grows in our lives through deliberate practice, and through proximity to the Holy One who is always kind.

Proximity and the Power of a Question

What does that kind of radical, patient kindness look like in the modern world? It looks a lot like a man named Daryl Davis.

Daryl Davis has one of the most unique collections you'll ever come across: he owns more than two hundred Ku Klux Klan robes and hoods. What makes his collection even more astonishing is that Davis is an African American man.

<https://youtu.be/1vTFkyLTk9k>

An accomplished jazz and blues musician, Davis has spent the past thirty years proactively and compassionately pursuing friendships with members of the KKK—many of whom had never interacted with a Black man in their entire lives. Through patient proximity and genuine listening, he has helped scores of men leave the Klan altogether. Each robe and hood in his collection was given to him as a voluntary gift by a new friend on the day they decided to leave that life of hatred behind for good.

What spawns these unlikely transformations? It isn't yelling, arguing, or matching hostility with hostility. During his very first meeting with a Klansman, Davis simply asks questions and listens patiently. But there is one question he always utilizes:

“Why do you hate me when you know nothing about me?”

That simple, piercing question completely greases the skids for deeper understanding—and it keeps adding more robes to his collection.

As author J.R. Briggs notes in his book, *The Art of Asking Better Questions*:

"What if a question is nothing more than an invitation to think? But if questions are so forceful, capable of changing even the perspectives and convictions of scores of KKK members to leave for good, why don't we ask more of them? Questions, it seems, aren't very sexy. At times, they can imply weakness, ignorance, insecurity, even disrespect or

rebellion. They can easily be misunderstood. They can seem inefficient—an interruption, distraction, or detour from the task at hand."

Conclusion: Cultivating the Soil

When we are confronted with the "agitators" in our own lives, or when we are face-to-face with our own mistakes, our temptation is to run back to the safety of rules, judgment, and defensiveness. We want to build walls.

But Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, calls us to the slow, patient work of growing fruit. Kindness doesn't mean we pretend mistakes don't happen. It means that when we or others fall short of the glory of God, we lead with a question instead of a condemnation. We choose proximity over polarization.

Like the pawpaw tree, this kind of love takes time to mature. It is a lifelong practice. So this week, when you stumble, or when someone else stumbles in front of you, remember Romans 3. Take a deep breath of God's grace, give yourself permission to be a work in progress, and ask the Holy Spirit to cultivate the conditions for true, lasting kindness to grow.

Amen.