

# Be Kind

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*“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)*

We are encouraged to be many things in this world: Be smart. Be observant. Be ruthless. Be empathetic. Be all you can be.

I recently had a discussion with one of my children regarding a mantra I used when they were children, long before God called me into His church. It was “Be nice!” I leveled this instruction at the kids at all times, but especially when they were squabbling. I would tell them, “Be nice! And you know what that is!”

How did this come about? It is not entirely my point, but it will do to lay a foundation. My family started on a hippie commune called Stephen’s Farm.

Stephen Gaskin was an American counterculture hippie icon best known as the “Acid Guru” in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. In 1970, Stephen Gaskin led a caravan of sixty vehicles (most of them painted and modified hippie school buses) across the United States from San Francisco to Summertown, Tennessee. There, he bought 1,200 acres of land and started a commune called “Stephen’s Farm,” or just plain “The Farm.” Stephen’s wife, Ina May Gaskin, was a midwife. In fact, she is known as “The Mother of Authentic Midwifery,” and we were there because of Ina May. She would take in any pregnant mother and help her have a baby.

More to my point, though, Stephen Gaskin often repeated that the best thing to teach your children is, “Be nice. And they know what that means.” There were a lot of children on The Farm.

What is this cliché from Stephen Gaskin, “Be nice. And you know what that means”? Let us dissect it a little bit. Is it the right thing to tell our kids? Does

it work? What does the Bible show us about it? Does a child actually know what that means? Do we?

The English word "nice" actually comes from the Latin word *nescius*, which means "ignorant," "naïve," or perhaps at best, "innocent." Its meaning has morphed over 750 years from "stupid" to "timid" to "careful" to "pleasant and agreeable," where it is today. In fact, it still has insipid overtones, weak and flavorless.

The phrase, "He's a nice boy!" is not entirely complimentary. It is more along the lines of the Southern expression, "Bless his heart!" containing a not-so-flattering element of sarcasm. The seemingly benign advice to "be nice" falls short of a truly virtuous approach to life.

## Conscience

The command to "Be nice!" is also an appeal to what should be innate. This appeal has precedent, which the apostle Paul addresses in several places in Romans. In Romans 1, he uses it in a condemnatory way. Paul writes that we have an innate ability to discern right from wrong, even without conversion, and we can be divinely condemned for failing to do so correctly.

. . . because what may be known of God is manifest in them [all men but particularly the Gentiles], for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and [divine nature], so that they are without excuse . . . (Romans 1:19-20)

These verses point us to the Creator and to the natural laws that are consistently applied to the processes of the universe. Even without the help of His Spirit, we can inherently see these rules and see God in them. Even our carnal selves know right from wrong, despite coming to it through a glass darkly. Psychologists acknowledge it and call it the conscience. Sociologists might refer to it as the collective conscience. Both are ways to describe the world without God—the atheist's perspective.

For most people, conscience is all they have, and it is where they stop on all moral matters. Most of modern Christianity—at least the laity—builds its whole understanding on the backbone of the conscience. And so arises the saying under consideration: “Be nice. And you know what that means.”

As J.B. Phillips states in his book, *Your God Is Too Small*, “No one denies the function of conscience.” But to make conscience into a god brings into being a shallow god indeed. It has grave weaknesses. For example, it does not lead to love, nor does it provide any understanding of the true God’s plan for us. It can also be very easily perverted.

We have all seen children younger than one year start to imitate their parents, other babies, and even the world around them. This indicates that they are already developing their worldview based on what they sense and experience in the world around them. Do we, as parents, see the burden of our responsibility? If we expect to be successful when asking a child to “be nice,” we had better already be displaying a godly example.

The world around us can falsely influence conscience. Consider this example: We have been instructed to put plastic in the recycling bin. Now, after repeated admonitions, throwing a plastic bottle or container in the trash can produce a sense of guilt. And this guilt survives even after we discover that trash of all kinds—even recyclable plastic—ends up in the same dump anyway.

In addition, children have carnal impulses from infancy. For example, small tykes will hit, lash out, and scream if not corrected. Such actions are a result of unrestrained, fleshly self-centeredness.

These behaviors occur in the natural world as well. Have you ever watched an eagle’s nest? When the brood is two or three eaglets, a pecking order always develops. The weakest eaglet will often be driven from the nest to fall hundreds of feet to die on the forest floor. Modeling a conscience on the natural world can create one that is “red in tooth and claw.”

## **Solomon’s Gates**

The command to “be kind” has a much more nuanced meaning than “be nice” because the word “kind” is well-used and therefore well-defined in the Bible. It is used, for example, in Ephesians 4:31-32:

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Being kind is defined as an outward-facing principle. Even for someone in the world, the meaning is clear. Kindness involves behavior, something that can be seen on the outside. In that respect, practicing kindness makes us visibly sanctified or set apart in a very unkind, selfish world. It involves the words we speak and the actions we take.

The well-known three gates of speech are attributed to the Sufi poet, Rumi: truth, necessity, and kindness. You may have heard or read of them as three questions we should ask ourselves before saying something to another:

1. Is it true?
2. Is it necessary?
3. Is it kind?

They really ought to be called “Solomon’s Gates.” King Solomon’s wisdom is featured in the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, and these writings preceded Rumi by 2,200 years. For centuries, despite Jesus’ attestation that he was a real person, the world’s archaeologists considered Solomon to have been made up, a biblical fairy tale. In fact, archaeologists have used the dearth of information on him to discredit the Bible!

However, archaeologists have found massive and extensive fortifications all over the Eastern Mediterranean that show blueprint-like consistency down to the centimeter. These fortifications date to the tenth century BC—the time of King Solomon. And their gates are known by archaeologists as—you guessed it—“Solomon’s Gates.” Ironically, they each have three chambers

on either side. (See Eames, Christopher, “[A Study Into King Solomon’s Four Monumental Gates](#),” *Let the Stones Speak*, November-December 2022.)

Consider three of the proverbs of Solomon:

» On *truth*, he writes in Proverbs 12:19: “The truthful lip shall be established forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.”

» On *necessity*, he writes in Ecclesiastes 5:3: “A dream comes through much activity, and a fool’s voice is known by his many words.”

» On *kindness*, he writes in Proverbs 16:24: “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.”

We must pass all three of these gates before we speak. For every word we say and every action we take, a Christian should go through a mental checklist like this. It is a list so abrupt, memorable, and concise that we can apply it in the moment before we open our mouth—or not, which seems to be the case given all the unkind words and actions that people express daily. I would surmise that *all* gossip would get stuck in one or more of “Solomon’s Gates.”

## Reciprocity

I recently had a discussion with my son about his childhood, and this cliché, “Be nice. And you know what that means,” came up. He said, “Of course you should be nice, but not at the expense of your own well-being.” His thinking seems to be that if someone’s demands diminish him, then he will not be as effective at helping.

The second half of his comment is troubling. Jesus Christ would give me a hearty “Wrong!” if I had made that statement. He says in Luke 6:32-35 during His Sermon on the Plain:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the

same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High.

Jesus is saying that whatever we do, it should be completely without a desire for reciprocity—the expectation of getting something in return.

If we expect something in return, we are no different than the mafia. In the scene in *The Godfather* at his daughter Connie's wedding, Amerigo Bonasera, the undertaker, has a problem of double reciprocity. Bonasera would not call himself a friend of the Don because he did not want to be associated with the mafia. But now, he suddenly needs the Don because his daughter, Maria, has been beaten by some society boys, and the cops will not help, so he asks the Don for help.

To paraphrase the Don's response: "You shoulda been my friend, and people would have feared you. But now, you gotta call me Godfather. And you will owe me a favor someday." Bonasera is now no more than just another common criminal paying the mafia for protection. This Godfather story contains other parallels. Had this little undertaker not denied his protector, he would have been protected even before he asked!

If we *withhold* kindness because we count the cost to ourselves and find it too dear, what does that say about our sanctification? What does that say about our pride? Are we so important and worth so much that it is not worth stopping to help someone? Luke 6:33 makes it clear: When we do so, we are no different from an ordinary sinner, criminal, derelict, or godless person who at least understands reciprocity. "Give to me, for I have given to you."

There may seem to be reciprocity in the example prayer given by Jesus Christ, when He says, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12), but it is not the same thing. God will be kind to us as we are kind to others. There is no word in the English language that represents this concept except in the biblical context. "Altruism" and "beneficence" are close, as is the modern concept of "paying it forward."

Doing the right thing simply because it is written on our heart, and not only because God expects us to do it, is the ultimate destination. In Daniel 3:17-18, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego know what they will do whether God delivers them or not:

If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up.

In a similar way, godly kindness must be freely given with no expectation of repayment. Where both parties get something, it is just a business deal. God is not in “The Art of the Deal.”

## **Joy in Giving**

When dealing with a new baby or a parent who is growing helpless, our ability to be kind is challenged. When put upon by someone in need, we tend to feel resentment, an attitude difficult to repress. But a true response in kindness comes naturally when we cease resisting and submit ourselves to God in humility. Being kind in this way is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

There is biblical precedent in experiencing joy when giving:

» In John 13:17 (KJV), Jesus, speaking of being a servant during the footwashing, says, “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.”

» Then, of course, there is the example of Jesus Christ Himself who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross (Hebrews 12:2).

We should learn to enjoy giving of ourselves, and when we do, God, too, will be pleased! Hebrews 13:16 reads, “But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”

The command to “Be nice” came from a pagan hippie. He was a nice boy, yet not entirely wrong. But with God, there is a whole lot more to the story.