

Recovering kindness

What makes kindness a distinctive mark of the new creation?

by [Christine D. Pohl](#) in the [October 31, 2012](#) issue



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I spend quite a lot of time reflecting on the human capacity for evil. Perhaps that is an occupational hazard for anyone who teaches Christian ethics. Then, as an act of moral self-preservation surely connected to God's mercy, I eventually turn to considering the virtues or practices that stand most directly in contrast to various forms of wickedness.

So in thinking about betrayal, I begin to think also about fidelity. A hard look at deception gradually gives way to exploring truthfulness, and accounts of cruelty eventually provoke reflections on hospitality.

Nevertheless, I recently surprised myself when I started to think about kindness. Kindness—as in random acts of? As in often mistaken for weakness? As in being nice? Does kindness really stand in contrast to wickedness in some substantive way? I wondered. It was after I had encountered several deeply disturbing accounts of utterly ruthless behavior that my reflections on kindness emerged.

Ruthlessness is not the only expression of evil that we might contrast with kindness, but it is one that plagues us. It comes in various forms and at multiple levels of destructiveness. Practices of warfare that include humiliation, rape, and targeting of

children are so inhumane and heartless as to defy comprehension. Anyone who has dealt with middle-school bullying knows about the social power and personal consequences of focused, crushing meanness. And then there are the exhibitions of ruthlessness that are crafted for our entertainment—reality TV shows that invite the audience to enjoy contestants’ pursuit of prizes that involve all manner of interpersonal betrayal. The disrespectful characterizations of opponents in contemporary public arguments and political campaigns are so common as to be almost taken for granted.

Our strong task orientation stands behind many of our justifications for ruthless behavior and speech. We who value getting things done as quickly as possible and are willing to do whatever it takes are at risk of trampling anyone and anything that gets in our way. Ruthlessness involves a strategic form of self-centered heartlessness, a total disregard for persons who block our personal goals or broader commitments. It is a choice not to see the impact of our actions on others because our goals, purposes and opinions are too important to fail.

People of faith have their own versions of ruthlessness—usually cloaked in something good because ruthless behavior in its raw form so obviously contradicts the gospel. We justify our unkind words or harsh actions because they are for the sake of the kingdom, the cause or the institution. Whether the disagreements are in a local church or at a global level, once we have characterized those with whom we disagree as enemies, our attempts to prevail are rarely limited by Jesus’ call for love, generosity and forgiveness. In the heat of battle we quickly forget that the goals for which we strive must be present in the means we use to achieve them, or else we are likely to miss the goals entirely.

Does the virtue of kindness challenge our regular resort to ruthlessness in any particular way? Is our understanding of kindness worth rehabilitating? Could a more robust practice of kindness contribute to our rehabilitation? Would it matter if Christians took it more seriously? As a practice, kindness is not necessarily efficient or convenient. And in a culture that highly values effective sound bites, it rarely comes off as clever.

We usually recognize both ruthlessness and kindness when we see or experience them. In the presence of ruthless behavior, we are wary and defensive; when we encounter kindness, we feel sufficiently safe to lay down our weapons. While ruthlessness leaves a trail of destruction, a truly kind person is able to find beauty

and goodness amid ashes.

Although we can describe the impact of ruthlessness and kindness, it is surprisingly difficult to define either one with any precision. Definitions of kindness generally fail to distinguish between it and compassion, gentleness, generosity or goodness. But kindness frequently appears in New Testament lists of the characteristics of those who have been made new by the transforming power of Jesus through the Spirit. Kindness is an expression of the new life, the new self and the new creation (see, for example, Gal. 5:22, 6:15; Eph. 4:22–32; Col. 3:1–12).

When Paul lists the “fruit of the spirit” in Galatians 5, he locates kindness after love, joy, peace and patience and before generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Because qualities like kindness, love, generosity and gentleness have significant overlapping spiritual and moral terrain, we might wonder if each one has any distinctive features. Why include kindness as a separate category? What makes it a mark of the spirit-filled new creation?

We do not need to look far for some possible reasons. God’s loving-kindness (*hesed*) sustains us and this strong covenantal emphasis runs through the scriptures. When that which is good and pleasing to God is summed up in Micah 6:8, it is “to do justice, and to love kindness [*hesed*], and to walk humbly with your God.” Our kindness reflects and is empowered by God’s kindness. When Paul seeks to describe and define love in 1 Corinthians 13, he writes that “love is kind.”

In Greek, the language for kindness includes an element of usefulness or showing oneself useful to another. This suggests a certain sturdiness and practicality in the New Testament usage that is less common to our understanding. Kindness is far more than a single or random action; it is part of a way of life characterized by moral attentiveness that is both respectful of—and helpful to—others. Kindness involves a recognition of our common humanity and frailty that leads us to care about each person’s particular well-being and to treat him or her as deserving of generous response and respect. Kindness can be expressed through our words or actions.

While in direct contrast to ruthlessness, contempt and disregard, kindness is stronger than tolerance and more demanding than indulgence. A weak notion of kindness is often used as an excuse for falsehood or for ignoring difficulties, and kind words can be confused with flattery and euphemisms. Truthfulness and kindness belong together, however, and Paul readily links truthful speech and

kindness in 2 Corinthians 6.

The important connection between kindness and truthfulness reminds us that the virtues and practices of the Christian life are dependent on each other. Unless accompanied by a practice of truthfulness, kindness quickly degenerates into an insipid and often dishonest form of being nice. Without fidelity, kindness is—at best—expressed in occasional acts that allow the person to avoid the messiness of caring for difficult people or in difficult circumstances over a long period.

A rehabilitated valuing of kindness could revive our commitment to being careful with our words. It would involve choosing not to seek personal, moral or political victories through words calculated to hurt and harm. It is especially easy to overlook the importance of kindness at the more anonymous levels of public life, but as Richard Mouw has so effectively argued, kindness is demonstrated in the courtesy and respect that underlies civil discourse.

For many people, the moral and spiritual significance of kindness has shrunk, and what is left is often not much more than sentimentality. Surely our current trajectory toward ruthlessness is not going to be redirected by a few random acts of kindness or a smattering of friendly words. But kindness as a posture of life and a practice that characterizes the people of God might just be sufficiently disarming to offer a glimpse into the new creation. In our words, conduct, debates and decisions, imagine what a surprise it would be if people first noticed our kindness.