

Column

Not everyone can be stunningly handsome or beautiful. Not everyone can be a great speaker. Not everyone can be a medical doctor that saves countless lives. Not everyone can run a Fortune 500 company. Yet, everyone can be kind.

Over half a century ago, the craft project at Vacation Bible School was cutting out a piece of oilcloth in the shape of a stained-glass church window, then pasting onto it a little slip of paper with a Bible verse. Mine that day was “Be ye kind.”

In the years to come, I learned the rest of Ephesians 4:32: “Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.” Even so, at that earlier stage in my life, those three words were sufficient to convey the message the apostle Paul was trying to get across to his first readers.

Jesus, of course, taught and lived by the same precept. When, for example, a group of men brought a woman caught in the act of adultery and asked Him to pronounce judgment on her, which according to the law was stoning, he did something unexpected. He turned the spotlight from the accused to the accusers. “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her,” He told them. The rest is history, as the expression goes. After they had slunk away one by one, he told her, “Go and sin no more.”

That day the Master not only gave her back her dignity, He gave her a new slate on which to write life's story. Isn't that what each of us require – not strict justice, but kindness.

Years earlier, in the Old Testament, one of Jesus' most famous antecedents, David, practiced the same virtue. Saul, the king who preceded him, was seeking to kill him. Yet, not on one but two occasions, when it was in his power to take Saul's life, he exercised restraint and kindness. Instead of paying back a bad turn with a bad turn, David paid back a bad turn with a good one. A lesson for us all.

We can, of course, find examples of people showing kindness much closer than in Bible times. Last week a friend in Alabama shared with me the story of a teacher whose kindness changed a young man's life.

Not original with him and perhaps you've heard it, a fifth-grade teacher had an unpleasant little boy in her class one year. He came to school dirty, often slept in class, was indifferent to his school work and at times surly.

At first, she found secret satisfaction in marking his papers with a big, fat 'F'. A few weeks into the school year, however, she reviewed his records only to discover that he had lost his mother a few years earlier and prior to that the remarks in his file had been positive.

At this point the teacher felt ashamed, and her whole approach to education changed. In her own words, "I quit teaching reading, writing and arithmetic and began teaching students."

The little boy she had treated with disdain became her special project. She gave him extra attention and most importantly showed him kindness. The change was dramatic. No longer at the bottom of the class, he rose to the top.

The story, however, does not end with the closing day of the fifth grade. For many years thereafter, the teacher received notes keeping her abreast of events in his life. Each would end with a word of thanks for what she had done for him. The last note was an invitation to attend his graduation from medical school

Kindness pays great dividends in the life that now is and no doubt in the life that is to come. "Be ye kind" . . . words for all seasons and people of all ages.

GRANT to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as are right; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity, The Book of Common Prayer)

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