

Kindness and Charitable Judgments

Kind is one of those words, like *love* or *justice*, that most everyone uses, but we're not quite sure what it means. It's been watered down into a mild sentimentality, as if kindness were a soft, touchy-feely thing, as if being kind was equivalent to being *nice*.

But for those who've experienced it or may have on a precious, rare occasion extended it, you know that kindness is a strong, courageous virtue. Like one of those rare flowers that blooms only one day a year, true kindness, when we see it, is a beautiful miracle.

God's word assures that anyone who wants to learn how to love must sooner or later wonder what kindness looks like in our day-to-day relationships?

The Face of Kindness

I've spent a lot of time with Ken Sande over the last several years and have learned a lot from him by listening and watching how he interacts with people, especially in hard situations or critical conversations. Of all the counsel Ken has offered, probably the one piece of wisdom I come back to again and again is the choice to make a charitable judgment.

In any interaction, but particularly one of conflict or just plain irritation, we can train ourselves to ask: what is a charitable judgment that I can make in this moment?

When our expectations are unmet or our wills are crossed or our feelings are hurt, the temptation arises not to be charitable at all, but to retaliate, to judge the other, to make assumptions about their intentions. We speculate about the motivations of their hearts. We presume to see clearly.

This doesn't feel evil to us. We tell ourselves that we are just being shrewd. But imperceptibly, we begin to tell ourselves a story. We move from our assumptions to making judgments about how this action or that word reveals the other's entire character. We assess them, silently and critically, with a sweeping brush. We begin to caricature them: we take a feature that has some validity to it, but we magnify and exaggerate it until it becomes central to the whole picture.

And we attach a lot of feelings to the story we are telling ourselves, not realizing how much harm we're causing, not just to them (Gal. 5.15) but to ourselves (Matt. 7.2).

I know this because I did this, for years. I considered myself "discerning" and quietly commended myself for (mostly) keeping my mouth shut, keeping my near-constant critical judgments to myself. "What? I didn't say anything!" While internally, I was making lists, keeping records of wrongs, summing up, judging.

When I catch myself doing that today (and it remains a daily temptation for me), I call to mind Ken's advice. I remind myself that my internal judgments say far more about me, my own lack of self-awareness and often my own shame, than they do about the other person.

When I'm inclined to judge, I catch myself and say, "Here's an invitation to make a more charitable judgment."

I confess that I used to think this was just an expression of Ken's off-the-charts optimism. It struck me as sentimental. Unrealistic. Less than clear-eyed. But I've come to see it as a courageous exercise of grace, a deliberate choice to move toward others in undeserved kindness. It is difficult work, replacing a critical spirit with one of curiosity born of compassion.

My old friend Orson Bean was fond of telling me a story that he said was a turning point in his life. He was on the subway in New York one day many years ago and there was a young father sitting across from him who was completely zoned out, distracted and disheveled. His three young kids were running all over the subway car, fighting with each other, yelling, disrupting the other passengers. Orson said he was sitting there thinking, *Don't you see your kids? Pay attention! What a terrible dad!* He remembered telling himself, *This is what's wrong with the world, absentee parents like this guy.*

Moments later the young man lifted his head and his tired eyes met Orson's. "We're just coming back from the hospital," he said. "My wife, their mother, she's not going to make it. We were just told that she's not going to make it." He shook his head and dropped his chin. In total shock, trying to hold back the wave of tears, he just wanted to tell someone, even a stranger on the subway.

You may say, "Well, that's an extraordinary story." Yes. But what is entirely ordinary is that the person sitting across from you, who may have just snapped at you in irritation or barked with impatience or who may just seem completely detached – that person is fighting a very hard battle. Don't be deceived by appearances.

Everyone is Fighting a Hard Battle

He or she is carrying a heavy burden that is causing a great deal of stress and anxiety. It's spilling out as impatience, irritability, or anger, but underneath that is some fear or sadness. They might be carrying a deep pain that they've been lugging through life for years, papering over with a smile. I recognize that person too. Because that person is also me. And that person is you.

I'm not asking you to suspend your judgment. Making a charitable judgment requires us to use it. It's about our self-understanding and our posture toward the other. Instead of withdrawing. Or ignoring. Or assuming the worst about them and their motives. Or talking about them to others behind their back. Instead ask yourself, "Am I always consistent? Don't they get to be complex? Don't they get to be a human being too?" (Rom. 2.1). It's the same balance Jesus holds out to us – compare Matthew 7 verses 1-5 with verses 6-7.

Resist that natural impulse to judge critically – especially when someone hurts you or disappoints you. Or says something wrong or hurtful. Yes, there's a time to correct, and accountability is important for all concerned. But when you're agitated is not that time. Now is the time to get curious instead of critical. Look underneath the behavior: I wonder what pain is moving them to react that way?

It's not cheap sentimentality. There's a wisdom in this choice. Undeserved kindness is a living, incarnational expression of grace. Here is a wounded, sin-burdened, insecure person, desperate to be understood, yearning to be loved, full of shame, terribly afraid and acting out. Just like me – and just like me in the self-contempt that led me to judge them in the first place. Behind a critical spirit lurks a great deal of self-hatred. Shamed people shame people.

The Bible says to welcome one another *just as God in Christ has welcomed you* (Rom. 15.7). Jesus is actually the only person in the universe who does see clearly, deep down into the hidden, often twisted motivations of our hearts. We don't see ourselves (Ps. 19.12; 1 Cor. 4.4). But Jesus does (1 Cor. 13.12, Ps. 139.23).

And yet, Jesus made and keeps making the decision to move all the way toward us in kindness, filled with compassion, longing to forgive and restore. "They know not what they do."

Kindness is What Compassion Looks Like

I'm slowly learning that life is so much more enjoyable when I choose to make a charitable judgment toward others.

"That's not who they want to be."

"They're having a hard time."

"That's their pain speaking."

"Remember that underneath their anger is a lot of sadness."

"Underneath their desire to defend themselves or attack others is a lot of shame."

So the next time you feel tempted to judge or to make a critical assessment, to sum up, to assume the worst about someone, remember how Christ moves toward you when you act like they are acting – or even worse. Try choosing instead to make a charitable judgment. Walk through your day extending compassion, especially where it's undeserved, and see what happens, to you and to them.

Seeing clearly but staying present and moving toward in compassion: that's what kindness looks like in practice. That's welcoming the person in front of you in the same manner that God in Christ has already welcomed you. There is so much more joy and peace in our lives when we live the Jesus way.