Believe: The Virtues of Goodness and Kindness

We are in a series called Believe that examines the 10 core beliefs, 10 core practices, and 10 core virtues of the Christian life. If you are joining us for the first time, we encourage you to pick up a copy of Pastor Randy Frazee’s book entitled Believe and join us as we unpack what it means to grow into a fully devoted follower of Jesus.

This morning we are looking at the virtues of goodness and kindness. I will unpack these virtues under 4 subheadings: 1) defining the Christian virtue of goodness; 2) defining the Christian virtue of kindness; 3) A few thoughts on our culture’s use of these words; and 4) how we can practically cultivate the virtues of goodness and kindness.

I. Defining the Christian virtue of Goodness

Goodness and kindness are quite similar; in fact, if you were to Google synonyms of “goodness,” you would find the word kindness, and vice versa. I think this is why Pastor Randy lumped both virtues together into one chapter (that and the fact that 30 chapters is clearly better than 31 chapters, right?). However, though admittedly similar, I am inclined to say that goodness and kindness are notably unique. Let us first look at goodness.

You might recall a conversation Jesus had in Luke 18 with a certain “ruler” who asks Him a question in Luke 18:18, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me ‘good?’ No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.” In His response, Jesus reveals the ultimate nature of goodness.

Goodness is NOT in the eye of the beholder. Goodness is not relative to my standard or society’s standard. Goodness is not something that I can accomplish on my own. Goodness is that which God defines in His Word and exhibits in His own character. There is no independent virtue of “goodness” that exists by which God can be judged, or by which man can be judged for that matter. Good belongs to God.

Because God is good, and because we bear God’s image, there is some “good” in all of us. But Jesus makes it clear: according to a biblical worldview, there is no such thing as “a good person” in the natural state. Such is why we do not believe that “good people go to heaven.” Our goodness does not save us; we become good as a result of being saved by grace. Once saved, the “old self” is crucified with Christ, so that the believer is “born again” (John 3) with a new character—a new identity that is, according to the Apostle Paul, the “I but not I….it is Christ living in me.” When Christ lives in us, as our thinking and our habits are conformed to His, we will not only do good, but over time, we will exhibit the virtue of goodness… which is to say that our speech and conduct will more and more reflect God’s character. This, I believe, is the essence of this virtue called “goodness.”

So…what does this virtue of goodness look like? The simple answer is: it looks like Jesus! Jesus always said and did that which was consistent with God’s character because that was always the heart of Jesus. If we are followers of Jesus…if we are becoming like Jesus…the virtue of goodness should be evident in every aspect of our lives including our speech and our conduct. In
Matthew 12, having just healed a man possessed by a demon, Jesus confronts some Pharisees who accused Him of casting out the demons by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Notice: since the Pharisees are evil, they can’t recognize Goodness, even as He stands directly in front of them. As Jesus responds to the Pharisees, He is going to help us better define goodness. Here’s what He says:

33 “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. 36 I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, 37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Note first that Jesus equates goodness with the fruit of a good tree. If the tree is good, then it’s goodness will become evident in what it produces. However, if the tree is bad, its fruit will inevitably betray that reality as well. The virtue of goodness is an overflow of who we are. Goodness will certainly lead to good works, and as we practice good works, our goodness will increase. But in the end, the virtue of goodness is an overflow of what is happening in our hearts.

Note also that Jesus measures goodness, to some extent, by the words that come out of our mouths. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks…on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Our words are powerful…for good or for evil. Proverbs 12:18 reads, “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts; but the words of the wise bring healing.” The Apostle James writes in James 3, “The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness…setting on fire the entire course of life and set on fire by hell…no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” James also teaches that our words will represent what is going on inside of our hearts. “With [our tongues] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?”

Clearly goodness can and will be revealed by our words. If we are growing in the virtue of goodness, it will be evident in what we say and what we don’t say…our choice of words will reflect the character of God or not; our words will reveal the truth of who God is and how God is to a watching world, or our words will defame God and misrepresent the God who saved us.

Our goodness must also be apparent by what we do. In Matthew 23 Jesus points to the scribes and the Pharisees, and says, “2 The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat,3 so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear,5 and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others.” Like the Pharisees of old, some religious people are very gifted at saying all the right things, but when it comes to what they do, there is an obvious lack of goodness. They teach that somebody should reach the lost, but not them. They cast vision that somebody should help the poor, but not them. They believe somebody should be fighting injustice, but not them. There are
many religious people who know the Bible inside and out and yet they do nothing…these are the very same religious people who reinforce the stereotype of “Christian hypocrites” that often disillusions the next generation, driving them even further from the church. Trust me friends: if you are doing nothing good, there is no goodness in you. Goodness will bear fruit that is measurable, obvious, and virtuous. Take a moment and inventory your life, the way you spend your time, your money, and your best energy. What kind of fruit can the average observer glean from your life?

Now, even more than a list of “good deeds to accomplish,” this virtue of goodness is also indicated by the absence of evil in our motives, speech, and actions. Remember: evil has no life apart from goodness. Evil is a parasite that infects goodness and attempts to corrupt it. However, if the parasite of evil is being removed by grace, goodness remains; and that goodness can then begin to flourish.

When Paul writes to the new believers in Colossae, this is exactly his point. He writes in Col. 3:
If then you have been raised with Christ, set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.  For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Therefore, put to death what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry…put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouths. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

I find that those who exhibit the Christian virtue of goodness are those who simply lack a lot of the “normal” motives, behaviors and attitudes that we have come to expect from people. In the absence of evil behaviors, doing good…being good…becomes their new normal. There are several in our congregation who exhibit the Christian virtue of goodness, and as I thought about them, I made a few observations. When you meet those who exhibit the virtue of goodness, you will find them to be curiously optimistic, not in a rush, quick to listen and slow to speak. They tend to ask really good questions; and then they listen attentively to what you say…as if your answer might be the key to the most important question in their minds. They will be those who have few secrets, no hidden agendas, and they always seem to be quite content with what they have. Their words will be seasoned with grace, they tend to have a deep sense of joy, and they are truthful…sometimes to a degree that makes you uncomfortable. Those who demonstrate the virtue of goodness are those who serve…they sacrifice and give generously. They constantly consider the needs of others before themselves, and they are fine if you never find out about all the good things they have done…because their goodness isn’t about being recognized or honored…their goodness is an overflow of Christ living in them. They do good because it’s the right thing to do…it’s what Jesus would do if Jesus was living their story.

Yesterday I had the honor of performing a graveside service for one of our elderly parishioners who recently passed, Mr. John Hughey. It was a small service comprised of close family members, so we had considerable time to just sit and remember John. As each member of the family spoke, they would speak of his goodness, and they literally listed almost every attribute I just described. He was generous, wise, selfless, helpful…always thinking about the needs of others. He was a good man…and he made decisions for his family and those he served based upon a deep conviction that it was the right thing to do, no matter the cost. Finally, after all of these virtues were shared, John’s daughter, Rhonda, summed up her father with these words: “He
just reminded me of Jesus…you could see Jesus in him.” That, in a nutshell, is the virtue of
goodness. You will remind people of Jesus. Here’s a question: what will your family, friends,
and co-workers say about you when you die? Will anyone say, “He/She reminded me of Jesus’’?
That would be a fun conversation to have during lunch, right? Let us now turn our attention to
the Christian virtue of kindness.

II. Defining the Christian virtue of Kindness

If goodness can be thought of as “who God is,” then kindness might be thought of as
“how God is towards us.” Whereas God’s goodness is captured in the perfect justice revealed in
His law; God’s kindness is captured in His mercy towards us in Christ. Such is why, for the
Christian, God’s goodness and kindness are generally inseparable. Here’s what Paul writes in
Ephesians 2: 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5
even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

God could justifiably abandon us as orphans since we are not good enough to be in His family,
but in His kindness, God adopts us into His family through Christ, ascribing the goodness of
Christ to our account. Jesus says in John 14:18, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to
you.”

When we read the Bible, we discover that God’s goodness is always accompanied by his
kindness, and God’s kindness towards us is never an exception to His goodness. This picture of
God’s goodness and kindness is beautifully captured in Titus 3:4-7:
But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

The Gospel is rooted in the goodness and kindness of our loving Father.

Now, we can often best understand what something is by identifying what it is not. If the
opposite of good is evil, the opposite of kindness is justifiable indifference.

Let’s look to a practical example on the human level. Let’s assume it’s trash day in your
neighborhood, but overnight there was a big storm with gusty winds. When you walk out in the
morning to get in your car and go to work, you notice that your neighbor’s trash can got tipped
over in the wind and now there is trash all over the street…some of which is in your yard. You
are in a hurry, you are wearing your nice work clothes, and picking up trash is not your best
sport. To make matters worse, your neighbor is not your favorite person…in fact, they can be
downright rude at times. So…what do you do? In theory, you can go to work and be justifiably
indifferent toward the neighbor’s trash can tipping over. After all, it’s their trash. They didn’t
secure their trash can properly. They can’t expect the neighbors to always be cleaning up their
mess…etc.

Kindness, however, would set aside your justifiable indifference with the intent of blessing your
neighbor as Jesus blessed undeserving people, even if it makes you late. So, you get out of the
car, you spend the next 10 minutes cleaning up the trash, and you make sure that the lid is now
securely attached. As you drive off, you realize that your neighbors will likely never know what you did, and your Christian virtue of goodness demands that you don’t tell them what you did because you know that telling them would place them in your debt…and the Christian virtues of goodness and kindness should never place people in our debt. Kindness is an act of mercy, love, consideration, and care for those who are not necessarily deserving…it is an expression of your goodness that is rooted in Christ.

Kindness is not politeness. Kindness is not tolerance. Kindness is not simply the absence of malice. Kindness is intentional, it is generous, it is more than expected, it is an expression of thoughtfulness, sacrifice, and care for another that says in no uncertain terms: “You are loved more than you know…and more than you deserve.”

Many of you know my friend and fellow church member, Dave Ellis. I’m going to pick on Dave as an example of kindness because I have been the recipient of his kindness now for some time. For several years now, Dave has been praying for me (and a host of others) at 4 a.m. on most days of most weeks. I know that is true because he will occasionally text me at 4 a.m. to tell me how he is praying for me, and then he will encourage me to stay the course and to preach the gospel. Now, I will admit to you that I do not get up and pray for Dave at 4 a.m. And I don’t feel as though he expects me to. Dave’s kindness is an expression of the love that he has in his heart for people, and I just happen to be one of those people who has the honor of being loved and prayed for by this gracious son of God. Dave’s kindness expects nothing in return; his kindness towards me is an expression of unmerited love and grace; and Dave’s kindness leads me to give thanks and glory to God, because I know that Dave is Dave…and Dave is being kind…because of what God has done in his life through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Remember, all the virtues of the Christian life should lead people to give thanks to God and to glorify our Savior, Jesus Christ. If our goodness or kindness brings glory to us, we are missing the point.

I suspect many of us could tell stories of those people who have blessed us with unmerited kindness. Perhaps it was an unexpected meal or visit, perhaps it was an anonymous check in the mail, perhaps it was discovering that our driveway was shoveled or that our yard got mowed when we were unable to do it ourselves. Sometimes kindness is a note with words that encourage us, or the extension of forgiveness when we know we don’t deserve to be forgiven. You will recognize the virtue of Christian kindness when you see it…why? Because the act of kindness will remind you of Jesus. The virtue of kindness will remind you of the way God first loved us.

III. Cultural confusion about goodness and kindness. Now, let me quickly address how these virtues of goodness and kindness get twisted and confused in our western culture.

First of all, goodness is hardly considered a virtue in our culture anymore. The very word, “goodness,” implies an objective standard of good and evil; and our western culture is quite averse to any such standard. Our new state religion called Humanism seeks to “create good without God;” but that’s harder than it sounds. Jesus wasn’t kidding when He said, “Only God Himself is good.” In the absence of God, “goodness” is reduced to a relative concept that changes regularly based upon the context. In other words, “What’s good for me may not be good
for you,” so who’s to say what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong? It’s all relative. In fact, without the God of the Bible, most people will fall back into some moral relativism that says, “If I do more good than bad, I’m a good person, so my bad doesn’t really matter.” That’s why many people in our culture will do a good deed or two during the holidays, or even volunteer to help with a church project. But there is no repentance, there is still plenty of evil, they are just trying to tip the scales in terms of defining themselves as “good people.” As you can see, this kind of “goodness” bears little resemblance to the Christian virtue of goodness.

Kindness, on the other hand, is a virtue that our culture embraces and promotes. In fact, kindness may be the highest virtue in our culture; and it’s not because our culture is adept at kindness….it’s exactly the opposite: our culture has become more fragmented and hostile than ever, and the whole world is looking for kindness.

The question is: can kindness exist without goodness? I’m not sure that it can. Kindness without goodness is compromised…kindness without goodness is ‘niceness.’ Niceness is superficial and conflict avoidant; kindness is a matter of the heart that seeks to do what is both good and loving, even if it means risking offence.

Here is where authentic Jesus followers are desperately needed. Christians should shine brightly as the purest marriage of goodness and kindness in any culture. Our goodness is rooted in God’s eternal character, and our kindness is rooted in Jesus Christ crucified. Our goodness and our kindness should be evident in what we say, how we live our lives, and how we treat people. As the prophet Micah wrote, “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your Lord.” There are many believers here at Colonial who are living out the virtues of goodness and kindness, but there are many of us who talk a good game, yet there is no evidence…no fruit in terms of our goodness or our kindness. Church…when we fail to show people BOTH goodness and kindness, we misrepresent our Lord. If the virtues of goodness and kindness are not evident in your life as a Christian, it means that it’s time to change what we are practicing.

IV. Cultivating Goodness and Kindness: As always, the virtues of Christ are cultivated through the spiritual disciplines. Goodness and kindness are no exception. All Christian virtues are first and foremost dependent upon the Holy Spirit taking up residence within us. But we must not be passive in our training. The Bible provides clear direction on how we are to train ourselves in goodness and kindness:

1) We cultivate goodness by practicing the character of God in our thoughts, deeds, and speech. The more we dwell on God’s character, the more we must “put to death” our sinful habits as we read in Colossians 3. Putting old habits to death is no easy task, but we must ruthlessly eliminate intentional evil from our lives. Consider the “evil” you intentionally expose yourself to in your average day. Think about your habits in terms of media and messaging. There is very little that we watch or listen to that is morally neutral. Think about what you put into you mouth, be it drugs or alcohol. Think about your sexual habits. Think about your pride. Think about your unforgiveness. Goodness will require us to put to death many of the private indulgences that we have become accustomed to. If we are going to cultivate goodness in our lives, we must ruthlessly eliminate the infusion of evil into our bodies, hearts and minds. As Paul writes in
Philippians 4, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things…practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” We must also become intentional about practicing good in what we do. Practice serving others by making a commitment to read with an urban second grader. Practice doing good by volunteering to serve in the church. Practice doing good by sacrificing something of great value to meet the needs of those who are without. Practice doing good by loving your enemy and turning the other cheek. The more we practice doing good, the more being good will become our new normal. This is precisely the point Jesus made in Matthew 7:24-25 when he said "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.” Don’t wait until you are good…don’t wait until you feel good…don’t wait until all the evil is eradicated from your life….to start doing what is right and good. Read Jesus, practice what He taught us, and you will cultivate the virtue of goodness.

2) We cultivate kindness by treating people the way that Jesus treated us. Jesus made it clear in John 13:34, “Just as I have loved you, so you also are to love one another.” Don’t miss the key words at the beginning of that sentence, “JUST AS.” Just as Jesus forgave, we are to forgive. Just as Jesus was merciful, we are to be merciful. Just as Jesus showed kindness to the undeserving, so we are to show kindness to the undeserving. Just as Jesus sacrificed himself for us, we are to make sacrifices for others. The next time the Holy Spirit prompts you to show kindness, remember those two words, JUST AS. If we will practice treating people just as Jesus treated us, we will cultivate the virtue of kindness.

As we leave here this morning, look for opportunities to shower people with kindness. Do what is good and right, even when nobody is looking. As we cultivate and practice these virtues of kindness and goodness, lives will be blessed and Jesus will be glorified. Let’s pray.