

“Three-Part Harmony”

The Big Nine, #5, 6, & 8 – Kindness, Goodness, Gentleness

Jeremiah 38:1-13; Galatians 5:22-23 ¹

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel frequently told his students, “When I was young, I admired clever people. As I grew old, I came to admire kind people.”² It’s been said that “We grow too soon old, and too late smart.” Is Rabbi Heschel right? Is it better to be clever, or to be kind?

As we continue our journey through the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, we look today at “kindness,” “goodness,” and “gentleness.” Although each of these could be treated separately, I’ve decided to look at them together, since dictionary definitions of each of these three words nearly always include the other two.

So, what do you think? Are kindness, goodness, and gentleness clearly distinct and different? Are they variations on a theme? Do they work together somehow?

I’ve actually pondered this conundrum for a while, and as I was considering this question some years ago, this sentence came to me, all at once: “KINDNESS is **who** you are. GOODNESS is **what** you do. GENTLENESS is **how** you do it.” Now I’m hesitant to claim anything like inspiration for that sentence, but it came to me fully formed, and I’ve continued to consider it.

It seems to me that the Bible tells us to be kind, to do good, and to show gentleness to all. Here are three verses that seem to capture the distinctions for me:

“**BE KIND** and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ” (Ephesians 4:32).

“For we are [God’s] workmanship. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can **DO THE GOOD THINGS** he planned for us long ago” (Ephesians 2:10).

“Be kind, **ALWAYS SHOWING GENTLENESS** to all people” (Titus 3:2).

Let’s look at these briefly in turn. As you see from the title I’ve given to this sermon, I’m going to suggest that they work together as “three-part harmony” in God’s Symphony of the Spirit.

KINDNESS (χρηστοτης). The ancient Greeks used the word *chrestotes* to mean “excellence” when they referred to things, and “goodness,” “honesty,” or “kindness” when they referred to persons. In the New Testament, *chrestotes* uniformly means “kindness,” whether referring to God (Romans 2:4, 11:22; Titus 3:4) or to humans (here and 2 Corinthians 6:6).³ In the Old Testament, *chrestotes* is the word the Septuagint always used to translate the phrase that “*God is good*,” which appears frequently.

Kindness seems to be a character quality that results in particular sorts of behavior. Kindness implies a benevolent disposition, a deep-seated characteristic involving a combination of helpfulness, gentleness, consideration, and compassion.

There is that in us that yearns to receive kindness. Mamie Adams always went to a particular branch post office in her town because the postal employees there were especially

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 3, 2017.

² Harold Kushner, *Living a Life that Matters: Resolving the Conflict between Conscience and Success* (New York: Knopf, 2001), p. 5.

³ *Chrestotes* means “goodness” in Romans 3:12, but this is because it is a quote of Psalm 14:3.

friendly. She went there to buy stamps just before Christmas one year when the lines were particularly long, and someone pointed out that there was no need to wait in line because there was a stamp machine in the lobby. “I know,” Mamie said, “but the machine won’t ask me about my arthritis.”⁴ Mamie knew what we also know—that kindness makes a person attractive.

Another good example of kindness is in the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. As you may remember, Naomi and her family moved from Israel to neighboring Moab because of a famine, and her two sons eventually grew up and married Moabite women. Sadly, Naomi’s husband and both of her sons died, and in her bereavement, Naomi decided to return to the land of Israel, to her hometown of Bethlehem, to live out the rest of her days.

Naomi encouraged Ruth and Orpah, her daughters-in-law, to stay in their own land and to remarry men from their own people. Orpah chose to do that, but Ruth would have none of it. Love caused her to insist on staying with Naomi. I’ll bet you remember her famous and moving words:

“Don’t plead with me to abandon you or to return and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you live, I will live; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me, and do so severely, if anything but death separates you and me” (Ruth 1:16-17).

And so it went. Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem and Ruth began to try to earn a living for the two of them as a gleaner in the fields. Gleaners walked through the grain fields after they had been harvested, picking up the stray stalks of grain that had been missed in the harvest. Gleaning was the work of the very, very poor, and Boaz, the owner of the farm where she was working, noticed Ruth right away.

We might think that Boaz noticed Ruth because she was beautiful, but, though Scripture does sometimes record that a woman was physically beautiful, it doesn’t say that about Ruth. The truth is that we don’t know anything about Ruth’s physical appearance, but Boaz told us himself what drew him to her. As he told her, “Yes, I know that you are a foreigner, but I also know about the love and **kindness** you have shown to your mother-in-law since the death of your husband” (Ruth 2:11). Kindness makes a person attractive. Boaz and Ruth eventually married, and they became ancestors of the Messiah. **Kindness is who you are. Goodness is what you do. Gentleness is how you do it.**

GOODNESS (αγαθωσυνη). The Greek word for “goodness” is *agathosune*. As we turn to our “second harmonic,” let’s say again that KINDNESS is **who** you are. GOODNESS is **what** you do. GENTLENESS is **how** you do it.

I first thought that the sentence should begin with “Goodness is who you are.” But as I thought about it, I remembered that Jesus told us that “Only God is good” (Matthew 19:17), and Paul said that “No one is good—not even one” (Romans 3:10).

A bit of research turned up such passages as “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever” (1 Chronicles 16:34), and “Taste and see that the Lord is good. Oh, the joys of those who trust in him!” (Psalm 34:8). So, I decided that I must have it backward.

As I look at how Jesus used the word, “good,” it seems to me that Jesus used the word for things that were accomplishing their purpose. For example, Jesus said that “a good tree can’t produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can’t produce good fruit” (Matthew 7:18). He said that “Salt is

⁴ *Bits & Pieces*, December 1989, p. 2.

good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again?” (Mark 9:50). Good trees produce what they’re supposed to produce. Good salt provides the flavor that is expected.

As it related to His disciples (and to us), Jesus talked about “good” as almost a synonym with “fruitful”: *“But the good soil represents those who hear and accept God’s message and produce a huge harvest”* (Mark 4:20). Along the same line, Paul wrote that *“we are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do”* (Ephesians 2:10).

God, of course, is Creator of all that is, the Bible tells us that God *“chose us in [Christ], before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him”* (Ephesians 1:4). The Bible says that you are chosen by God, loved by God, the very workmanship or artistic creation of God, with a purpose for your life designed by God Himself.

Some translations render “workmanship” as “God’s Masterpiece.” What does it feel like to be “God’s Masterpiece”? Do you really believe that you are? Well, it’s “in the Book”! Paul said that God forgives us, redeems us, and transforms us so that we can participate with God in causing God’s Kingdom “to come on earth as it is in heaven.” Paul told us that God has things for you to do that were planned long before you were born. That’s what Jesus meant by “good,” and that’s awesome.

It’s crucial to understand that goodness grows out of a vital, personal, loving relationship with Jesus, and only from that relationship. Like every other Fruit of the Spirit, goodness is not our own achievement, but is the result of God’s transforming work in our lives. *“I am the vine; you are the branches,”* Jesus said. *“Those who remain in me, and I in them, [that is, those who stay connected to me,] will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5).

Jesus told us that, apart from Him, we have zero goodness. He said that, no matter how important the things we accomplish may seem to be from a human perspective, if what we do doesn’t grow out of His Life in us, it will be worth nothing in the end—nothing at all. Lamar Willis, the Minister of Music in our church in Atlanta as I grew up, frequently told us as young people, “Only one life, ‘twill soon be past; only what’s done for Christ will last.”

It’s important to know that there is more danger in “goodness” than there is in kindness and gentleness. The danger in goodness is that we will come to think that the goodness in our lives comes from our own efforts rather than from God. I’m always stung when I read Jesus’ statement that *“I have come to call sinners to turn from their sins, not to spend my time with those who think they are already good enough”* (Luke 5:32). The goodness in our lives—all of it—is God’s. **KINDNESS is who you are. GOODNESS is what you do. GENTLENESS is how you do it.**

GENTLENESS (πραυτης). Finally, let’s look briefly at our “third harmonic,” “gentleness.” The Greek word being translated as “gentleness” is *prautes*. It’s also translated as “meekness.” Some of you have been wondering what in the world I was going to do with that unusual passage Tim read from Jeremiah 38. We’ve now come to that, and it’s one of my favorite illustrations of how this all works together in three-part harmony.

As we read earlier, Jeremiah had been thrown into an empty cistern for preaching God’s Word, where he had sunk into deep mud. Ebed-melech, an important palace official, and a Cushite, took soldiers to rescue Jeremiah from the pit. While we’re not sure where the land of Cush was, it’s generally thought to be in the area of modern Ethiopia, and the Septuagint always translated “Cush” as “Ethiopia.” In Jeremiah 13:23, God asked Jeremiah, *“Can the Cushite*

change his skin, or a leopard his spots?” suggesting that the hero of our story was a black African.

Though it was politically incorrect and more than a little dangerous, Ebed-Melech took thirty men under his authority and went to rescue Jeremiah. And here’s the point of my telling this story: as he lowered the ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern, Ebed-melech also told him to “*Put these rags under your armpits to protect you from the ropes*” (Jeremiah 38:12). Ebed-Melech’s ropes were “goodness.” The rags were “gentleness.” The ropes were “doing the right thing.” The rags were kindness and compassion.⁵

Although Jesus himself was sometimes fierce, He was also gentle, especially with the children who were brought to Him. Over the disciples’ objections, Jesus said, “*Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.*” And He put his hands on their heads and blessed them (Matthew 19:14).

As Jesus was with the children, so He is with us, no matter how old or young we are. Applying Isaiah’s prophecy about the Messiah to Himself, Jesus told us that He will not crush those who are weak, and He will not quench the smallest hope (Matthew 12:20).⁶

God asks us to be gentle, too. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that “*God blesses those who are gentle and lowly, for the whole earth will belong to them*” (Matthew 5:5). And Titus reminded us that we should “*be kind, always showing gentleness to all people*” (Titus 3:2).

One of my favorite non-biblical parables about gentleness is Aesop’s *Fable of the Wind and the Sun*.⁷ The story goes that the wind and the sun were arguing about which was the stronger. They saw a man on the earth wearing an overcoat, and they agreed that whichever of them could cause the man to remove his coat the most quickly would be the stronger.

The wind huffed and puffed, and blew and blew, but the more the wind blew, the more tightly the man held his coat. Finally, the sun said, “Okay, it’s my turn.” The sun gently beamed and beamed, and before long, the day had become so warm that the man had removed his coat. Gentleness won the day.

So there you have it. KINDNESS is **who** you are. GOODNESS is **what** you do. GENTLENESS is **how** you do it. This is God’s three-part harmony within the Fruit of the Spirit. Let the music begin!

⁵ When I think about gentleness I remember a sentence I learned from Wade Rowatt, one of my seminary profs. Wade frequently reminded us that “The sword is always sharper on the blade end.” While that seems obvious, the point Wade was making is that, when I am offering feedback to a friend, attempting to “*speak the truth in love*” (Ephesians 4:15), no matter how “prayed up” I may be, and no matter how carefully I choose my words, I’ve always “got the sword by the handle.” Feedback is always sharper on the “blade end.” The writer of Proverbs reminds us that “*Gentle words bring life and health*” (15:4). How much we need gentleness in our speaking, especially in current-day America!

⁶ See also Isaiah 40:11.

⁷ <http://www.bartleby.com/17/1/60.html>