

PERSPECTIVE

MAY 2017

NO MORE
MR. NICE

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS ON KINDNESS



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No More Mr. Nice: Pastoral Reflections on Kindness

My family didn't make much of birthdays. In fact, with the exception of the year we went to Pietro's Pizza to play video games, none stand out. But on October 4, 1996, my wife made reservations at a steak house for my birthday. When we arrived at our table, a handful of friends yelled, "Surprise!" That was a good day. They spent time and money celebrating God's gift of another year to me.

What did my wife and friends demonstrate that night? Kindness. It's a simple virtue, and one easily overlooked. However, the presence of kindness is preeminent evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in a believer's heart.

THE OVERLOOKED VIRTUE

I used to think vanilla was simply the absence of chocolate. Therefore, I couldn't understand why anyone would actually *prefer* vanilla ice cream. Vanilla, I thought, is simply what's left when you remove all other flavors.

It's easy to think of kindness along similar lines, as merely the absence of vice. Given this understanding, a kind person is not rude, not overbearing, and not mean. But there is so much more to kindness than the absence of meanness.

Kindness is the presence of compassion and generosity toward others. A kind person is helpful, useful, and lovingly working for the well being of others. If goodness is the light of God shining within the human heart, kindness is the light of God shining from the human heart. Kindness exists for the benefit of others.

To put it bluntly, a person sitting at home simply remembering my birthday isn't being kind. Kindness has hands and feet. Kindness gets in the car, goes to the restaurant, and waits. Kindness pulls out a credit card and cheerfully pays the price of enjoying an evening with a friend. Goodness is. Kindness works. Kindness is more than being Mr. or Mrs. Nice; it's making a difference.

OUR KIND GOD

It should come as no surprise to learn that kindness, as a fruit of the Spirit, is an attribute of God.

In Romans 1, Paul paints a startling portrait of humanity's darkness. Wickedness explodes in a heart untouched by saving grace: "They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Rom. 1:29b–31). Like a skilled attorney building his case, Paul leaves no room for doubt: our condemnation is deserved. In Romans 3:23, he summarizes his argument, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Our only hope to escape God's judgment is to embrace his kindness, kindness we all once spurned. God can melt the coldest heart. His kindness ran toward us when we walked away from him in unbelief. As Paul states in Romans 2:4, "God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance." While we were set in our rebellious ways, God's kindness appeared in a manger in Bethlehem (Titus 3:7). When we were flooded with anger and racism, God's kindness grafted Gentiles into his family tree (Rom. 11:22). And though we continually fall short of his glory, in Christ God promised his kindness as an eternal gift (Eph. 2:7). Though we deserve his wrath, we are the beneficiaries of his kindness.

We should expect those filled with God's Spirit to be kind as well.

WHEN KINDNESS ERUPTS

Being celebrated by friends at a birthday party was a real (albeit small) act of kindness, however it pales in comparison to the day a high-school friend told me I was going to hell.

We'd gone to a play together. I expected casual conversation. Instead, she said she was a Christian. I wasn't sure what that meant, but over the course of the evening I discovered it means the world. She affirmed it all. There really is a God. He's made himself known in Christ. The Bible is his Word. To know Christ as Lord and Savior is to have everlasting life. She believed everything, the whole kit and kaboodle.

My back began to bow as I not-so-gently pushed back: "Do you think I'm going to hell?" I asked her.

I'll never forget her response, "Yes, Aaron, if that's what you believe and how you live your life, then yes, I think you are going to hell." She could have been polite. She could have played Ms. Nice, changed the conversation, and let the tension in the room run its course. Instead,

she did the hardest and kindest thing a Christian can ever do. She challenged me with the truth of the gospel.

This is what happens when kindness erupts in the hearts of God's children. We challenge and comfort others with the truth of Christ. Kindness, Paul explains, led him to share the gospel in the midst of "afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, [and] hunger" (2 Cor. 6:4b-5). Kindness (along with humility, meekness, and patience) empowers you to forgive a brother or sister (Col. 3:12-13). Kindness helps you put "bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander . . . along with all malice" to death before they tear up local churches (Eph. 4:30-32).

Kindness is the virtue that leads us to act toward others in the same way Christ Jesus acted toward us—with love, care, compassion, and concern.

"TREASURES OF INESTIMABLE PRICE"

I know I am being kind to Mount Vernon when I sit in my study and prepare for next Sunday's message. The primary way I practically serve the body of Christ is by preaching. I long for the people of God to be spiritually well fed. This takes hours of hard work; hours I kindly and joyfully give.

And yet there is more to pastoral ministry. The old Suffolk preacher, Charles Bridges, noted: "The ministry is not . . . a work of contemplation, but of active, anxious, devoted employment. The spirit, business, and delight of doing good must therefore form an essential part of preparation for the work."¹ He went on to call the daily opportunities to visit the sick, share the gospel with kids, and engage one's neighbors "treasures of inestimable price."² He was right.

A kind pastor does more than preach, he enters into the lives of those entrusted to his care. He does so without favoritism and guile. He engages with members of the body: the old and the young, the rich and the poor, those who look like him and those who don't, the confident and the doubting. In short, as Bridges would put it, he is actively, anxiously, and devotedly employed for the good of his flock. He does so much more than preach the Word of God.

Pray all your elders are like this. I want to grow in this area. I know on the Day of Judgment God will weigh more than the orthodoxy of my preaching. He will assess the kindness of my pastoring.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Are you marked by kindness? Are compassion and generosity toward others present in your life? What would it look like for you to grow in kindness?

- ♦ **Get to work in your sphere of influence.** Trying to change the world is a good thing. By all means, read books about evangelizing the nations, fighting racism, and engaging in orphan care. But let's not forget our backyard. Kindness, properly understood, will cause you to reach out to your workmates, your neighbors, and your friends. In your kindness you model something of the Savior.
- ♦ **Create some margin.** Between work, family, and screen time many of us have lost the capacity to act in kindness toward our neighbors. Those everyday opportunities to serve, what Bridges called "treasures of inestimable price," go sadly unnoticed. A little margin in a busy life will go a long way.³
- ♦ **Make your church ground zero for acts of kindness.** Let your kindness be evident in practical acts of service toward brothers and sisters. Kindness will show itself in everything from a word of encouragement to a brother in despair to a grocery store gift card for a needy family. Stay a few minutes after the service to catch up. Open your home to a small group. Write a letter of encouragement to a deacon. These are practical acts of kindness that will bless the body of Christ. Surprising a friend on his or her birthday wouldn't be a bad idea either!
- ♦ **Remember the kindness of God.** If you are anything like me, you are tempted to take pride in your kindness. Self-righteousness stalks all of us. The key is to see kindness as the extraordinary gift of our God who demonstrated his own kindness on a cross. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32). Our kindness to others is always rooted in our God who is kind enough to save us.

Let's not overlook kindness, for it takes us to the very heart of the gospel.

~Aaron Menikoff

¹ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1959), 65. Italics added.

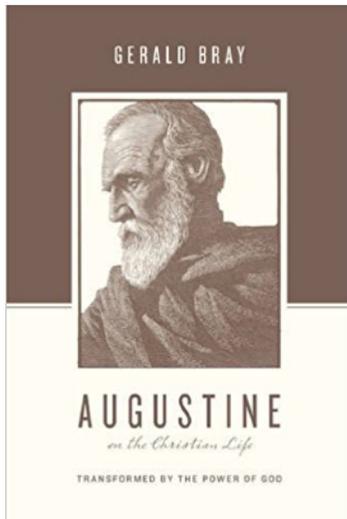
² *Ibid.*, 66.

³ Consider reading Kevin DeYoung, *Crazy Busy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

Augustine on the Christian Life: Transformed by the Power of God

Written by Gerald Bray

Bookstall Price \$18



God uses people from generations ago to teach us, counsel us, and testify to the power of God among us.

Augustine is one of the great examples. This bishop in North Africa lived 1,500 years ago, but his life and teaching still testify about God's sovereign power and mystery of God's attributes in powerful way to us today.

In this book, Augustine's life and belief is introduced mainly in three parts: Augustine as a believer, a teacher, and a pastor. Readers will find how the gospel of Christ transformed

Augustine from ambitious philosopher to humbled believer of truth, from a man of lust to a man of devotion to God. The book's introduction of Augustine's teaching is highly educational and edifying as it covers Augustine's own written works, such as *Confessions* and *The City of God*. Also, readers may find it a pleasant surprise to discover Augustine as a local church pastor. In fact, he served as a pastor in Hippo, a city in North Africa, for 34 years, and he believed that "the focus of Christian experience was the local congregation where the love of God could be seen binding people together."

I would recommend this book to any Christian brother and sister who desires to grow in understanding God more thoroughly, regardless of their levels of familiarity with Augustine. The book is a great introduction to people who are not familiar with him and is written in very accessible way. Author Gerald Bray's thorough research also ensures that the richness and depth of Augustine's teaching is maintained. I pray that God would lead you to deeper knowledge and trust in him through this book and through Augustine's life and teaching.

– RECOMMENDED BY SOONHYONG KWON

Excerpts from the Book

1

"Like Paul, Augustine was deeply conscious that it was not he who had found God but God who had found him. This is the hallmark of true conversion and it shaped his entire outlook."

–Augustine the Believer, p. 50

2

"Augustine wrote [*The City of God*] to reassure his readers that the sovereign Lord of the universe was in control of human history and that what had happened to Rome was no worse and no more preventable than what had happened to any number of cities before it and what would continue to happen until the end of time."

–Augustine the Pastor, p. 186

3

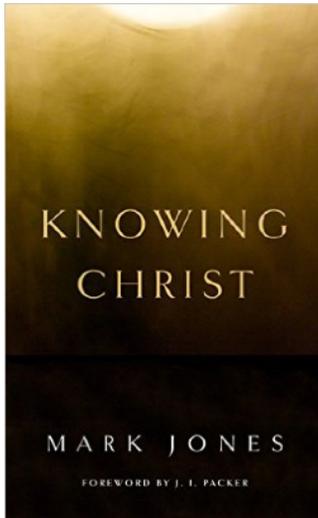
"[Augustine] told his people: "Nothing is better or sweeter for me than to gaze upon the divine treasure without noise or bustle—that is what is sweet and good. To have to preach, to exhort, to admonish, to edify, to feel responsible for each one of you—this is a great burden, a heavy weight on me, a hard labor."

–Augustine the Pastor, p. 175

Knowing Christ

Written by Mark Jones

Bookstall Price \$14



Understanding the person and work of Christ is one of the most important issues facing the church. This is true for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that poor Christology leads to poor theology. In *Knowing Christ*, Mark Jones takes his readers on a much-needed exploration of the person of Christ that is theologically rich and spiritually nourishing.

In fact, it is not possible to do justice to the comprehensive nature of this book. There are a great number of good Christian books that, while theologically sound, do not necessarily mine the

depths of Scripture like the Puritans of old. That cannot be said of *Knowing Christ*. There is nothing superficial about this work. Mark Jones is a Puritan scholar of the first order and has an uncanny ability to take difficult subjects (such as Christ's divinity) and communicate them in a style that is accessible to his readers yet profound in his delivery.

The structure of the book is also appealing. It contains 27 chapters that do not need to be read sequentially. Like J.I. Packer's *Knowing God*, it could be viewed as "a series of small studies [on] great subjects" that coalesce into a single beautiful message concerning our Savior. The chapters are brief, almost devotional in nature, but packed with loads of biblical truth and supported with copious references to Scripture.

Ultimately this book is written for God's people—that we may know Christ better and therefore love and cherish him even more. If you are hungry to explore the riches of Christ at deeper levels, *Knowing Christ* will serve as a great companion on your journey.

— RECOMMENDED BY SCOTT HARTY

Excerpts from the Book

1

"[B]ecause of our finiteness...we shall never reach a point where we have no need to learn more about Jesus."

—Christ's Declaration, p. 6

2

"The Christian grace of humility begins by imitating the incarnation of the Son of God. In order to do so, we must understand it; and in order to understand it, we must meditate upon it."

—Christ's Incarnation, p. 33

3

"There has never been a greater humiliation of a person than that of Jesus. No one has ever descended so low because no one has ever come from so high."

—Christ's Humiliation, p. 117

He will have
COMPASSION
 according to the
 ABUNDANCE of his
STEADFAST
 love

LAMENTATIONS 3:32

For the Lord will not
 cast off forever,
 but, though he cause grief, he will have
 compassion
 according to the abundance of his
 steadfast love
 for he does not afflict from his heart
 or grieve the children of men.

-Lamentations 3:31-33

Jeremiah saw God's city, Jerusalem, laid bare by the Babylonians. He saw God's people experience God's judgment for their unfaithfulness to the covenant as they were dragged off into exile. It was inevitable that he would question God's disposition and heart toward his chosen people. "Has God abandoned us? Does he not love us? Are we forever no longer his beloved children?"

Difficult trials can be a breeding ground for doubt and unbelief. Satan and our sin tempt us to believe God can no longer tolerate us for our failings, so he does away with us. In some cases, the trial is obviously the Lord's discipline, but that is not always the case. Sometimes it is an eerie silence and seeming distance from the Lord's presence. In those moments, once we've gotten past the worldly rubble of what we may have lost, we want to know if our heavenly Father has withdrawn his steadfast love from us.

Jeremiah was given a glimpse of the Lord's heart in the midst of the Lord's discipline. He saw that, though God's people had been "cast off," it would not be "forever." The Lord's discipline had caused "grief," but he "will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love." The Lord was not set out for revenge "for he does not afflict from his heart." Israel's experience of God's discipline was proof that the Lord loved them as a beloved son (Heb. 12:5-11).

Christian, remember that any discipline you may experience is there to train you to be fruitful in righteousness (Heb. 12:11). Your loving Father is training you, his beloved child, for eternity. And when you step out of this world into the heavenly one, you will be in the presence of Jesus, your Savior. On that day, you will begin your eternal journey of knowing just how much you are loved as you come to share in the eternal love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

— BRAD THAYER

NEW MEMBERS



Pat Adams



Brandon & Kendra
Davis
(Myla & Adley)



Nathan Powell



Jack & Marjorie
Roberson



Katie Vines



Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH