We have been considering what life is like on the vine. When we live connected to Jesus, we end up producing the fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, and today we take a look at kindness.

Kindness is maybe the easiest of the fruits to understand. It is something every mother tries to instill in every child. And if you have ever spent any amount of time with a child, you know that kindness is not a natural state. But we also realize that our culture is not dead set against kindness and in some ways kindness is even promoted. Somehow we recognize that we ought to be nice to others if we expect them to be nice to us. So as we grow, most of us come to realize that having a general kindness towards others is a good rule to live by.

Awhile back there was a meals on wheels billboard that I would pass on the highway…It simply said, Deliver a warm meal, get that warm fuzzy feeling inside. Now certainly meals on wheels is a good organization, they provide a needed service, and they work to extend kindness to those they serve. The gist of this particular ad however is much like any other commercial…it’s telling you what you are going to get out of the deal. So when it comes to the idea of true kindness, this billboard misses the point. Jesus says If you only lend to those who will pay you back, what good is that…anyone does that. If we do something in order to receive something, even if it is a fuzzy feeling, we may not quite be hitting on the kindness that the Holy Spirit is working to produce in us.

Kindness is simple. It is providing help when someone is in need of help. It is probably the most noticeable of the fruits in that it is the most outward. We might speak of someone being kind-hearted, an internal disposition, but we would only come to that conclusion after witnessing the way in which someone lives their life. But, biblically speaking, kindness is more than just being nice…If the standard is just to be nice, well then what do we need the Holy Spirit for? Most people we come across are nice or at least nice enough. But kindness asks a bit more of us, it pushes us to the next level.

We live in a culture of self-sufficiency. As parents, we encourage and congratulate children when they do things on their own. Our hope for them is that they do well in school, get a decent job and move out on their own. We hear stories of self-made millionaires who took a risk and worked hard to earn what they have achieved. In a self-sufficient world, you do not depend upon anyone else. You are capable of taking care of yourself. Most of us would consider this a good thing. However, one problem that this creates is an inability to accept help from others. If I need to ask for help, then that means that I have failed to take care of myself. I must be inadequate or weak. Of course, if we take a step back, we can see that everybody depends on everybody. Being truly self-sufficient is a fallacy. For example, if I am hungry, I might go to the grocery store and pick up a few items to prepare at home. But in this process, it is clear that I am depending on a whole host of people to make my trip possible. Farmers, manufacturers, truckers, even those who have stocked the shelves have all played a role in feeding me. But we don’t like to admit that we are dependent on other people.

Along with our sense of self-sufficiency, our culture also encourages autonomy. Autonomy is this idea that we are ultimately in control. In the past, authority would rest with the king, or perhaps the church, but in our modern era, we all get to decide for ourselves what is best. In many ways, this can be a good thing, but freedom comes with responsibility. The progression of autonomy has culminated in high divorce rates, overwhelming problems with addiction, and confusion in the realm of human sexuality. When we make ourselves the final authority, then anything goes, because at that point we have decided to make ourselves god. And there in lies the main problem with our cultural autonomy: if we are self-made people who are dependent on no one, then surely we don’t need God. If I am self-made then God becomes optional. Since I am not dependent on God, God can just become an add-on to my life, maybe he makes me feel a little better in tough times, or maybe I flash him around a little bit to show that I am a good person. I could do without him but I choose to make him a part of my life. And if God wants to be a part of my life well then in some twisted way, my openness to God, my prayers, my church attendance, actually becomes me doing God a favor.

But God saw all this coming. In fact, he warns the Hebrew people about this very problem as they look forward to moving into the promised land. Deut. 8:11-18…I mean to you hear that? Is God speaking to Ancient Israelites or to modern day Americans? Both I’d wager. In our abundance, as we thrive in many ways God becomes less and less visceral. In the wilderness, after being delivered from slavery in Egypt, these people needed God to hold them by the hand. They needed to be led to water, and fed manna each day. They were painfully dependent on God’s hand of provision. Today, we educate ourselves, we earn a salary, we set goals, and save up and make our dreams a reality. And when we can’t quite cut it or make a misstep, we have social programs to lend a hand and government safety nets…but God? Who really needs God?

And if I do not need God, I certainly do not need other people. And this train of thought leads us to conclude that asking for help or needing a helping hand is tantamount to failure. But the reality is, we need each other. None of us can make it on our own. Accepting kindness from another person binds us together. In fact, our greatest gift from God is other people! There is a place for personal responsibility, but we also need to see that that the line between my life and yours is blurry…we are in it together. This is how we understand the church. One body made of many parts working together. Body parts that exist separately from one another are dead and useless. It is only when these parts are connected and working in tandem with give and take, sharing sufferings and joys, now we can see and understand the importance of one another. I need your acts of kindness, and you need mine. I need your words of wisdom and you need mine. I need you and you need me, mutual dependency, not self-made autonomy. Do we really think that we can hear the voice of God speaking to us when we don’t even bother to stop and listen to our own brothers and sisters?

Cultivating kindness begins with recognizing our own story.

Romans 2:4 Paul asks us: Don’t you realize that God’s kindness is supposed to lead you to change your heart and life? We don’t really like change, do we? Especially when life seems to be going well enough. We have all we need why fix what isn’t broken? But that may be just the biggest problem we face. We are not broken…we are doing fine…sure life could be tweaked here and there, but to change my heart and life? That seems a bit excessive. But think about this: If I struggle to accept kindness from other people, how open am I to accepting God’s kindness toward me? Only when I am broken, only when I am conscious of my depravity and abject poverty, only then am I in a position to accept God’s kindness, only then do I understand my dire need for his sustaining hand in my life.

Cultivating kindness begins with remembering our story…we have nothing and yet, but God’s own kindness we have everything because we have each other. But we cannot just leave it there. Sure we can help one another out and experience mutual kindness but there is a deeper relationship to be had…If God’s kindness leads us to repentance, then our kindness ought to do the same. What do I mean by that? Kindness cannot be just being nice….kindness leads to life change, to transformation, to the uncomfortable realm of growth. So kindness should manifest among the people of God as mentoring relationships. Christians cannot be self-made, we are formed through out relationship with Christ and his body, the church. The ultimate kindness then is for me to take a stake in your Christian life. Your faith life and development becomes part of my responsibility. My life is lived at the expense of yours and likewise, you take an interest in my walk with Christ and together we feed and encourage this life change, this transformation. This is the body of Christ, not individual Christians who are nice to each other and happen to go to the same church…but rather people utterly dependent on the kindness of God, who are involved in the life change of their brothers and sisters.

So luckily you are part of a church that is working toward this reality! Pastor David and I are not okay with a nice church…we do not want you to be too comfortable keeping your faith all to yourself. So be involved in the lives of others stretch yourself! Offer kindness and receive kindness! There are two ways to do so: Grow groups! Our current summer groups are finishing up, but come September you will have the opportunity to join a new group. Take that opportunity, don’t settle!

Secondly, also in September, we are starting up ECHO. ECHO is on Wednesday nights for all ages…do you hear that ALL! If you are an older person in this congregation, you can extend kindness by helping lead and mentor those who are younger. It is part of why you are here! You are not allowed to say, I’ve already done that, or I don’t need that…the point is, they need you! My kids need you in their lives. My peers need your example and wisdom in our marriages and in our parenting. Wednesday nights can become a chance to give and receive life-changing kindness, but grow groups and ECHO do not work unless we show up!

So do not settle for being nice people, press on toward the life change that God’s kindness brings about.