

Sermon for Zion, September 20, 2020

Hymns: 293 – Come, thou Almighty King; Like the Good Samaritan; 382 – Spirit of God, Descend Upon my Heart

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-5; Colossians 3:12-15

Sermon: Signs of the Heart - Compassion, Kindness, Humility, and Meekness

Matthew 5:1-5 NIV

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”

Colossians 3:12-15 NIV

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

I was in the hospital last week, waiting in Emergency, and passing the time by reading a poster entitled, “Signs of a Heart Attack.” Now, it is important to know these signs, to be able to recognise them in ourselves and others, but inevitably, whenever I think too hard about them, I begin to experience them. Let’s see if it works with you:

- A squeezing sensation or pain in the centre of the chest or behind the breastbone which lasts more than ten minutes
- Pain that spreads to the shoulders, neck or arms
- Sweating and feeling short of breath
- A sick feeling in the stomach.
- A feeling of dread or doom

So, feeling any of those yet? Well, keep dwelling on them for any length of time, particularly after you are laying peacefully in your bed, and you will, you will.

For right now, though, I would like to turn your attention to a different, more positive, more encouraging set of signs. When you’re feeling these next signs, the last thing you have to worry about is whether or not to call 911. We talked about these last week as the Signs of the Presence of the Spirit of God at Work in our Lives and our Church, or, to be more concise, “The Sixteen Signs.” And here they are:

Compassion; Kindness; Humility; Meekness;
Patience; Tolerance; Forgiveness; Love;
Peacefulness; Thankfulness; Devotion; Co-operation
Gratitude; Joy; Activity; Outreach

To quote a great preacher, *“A life that is giving evidence of all these things is a life in which the Spirit of God is busy at work. A church that is giving evidence of all these things is a church in which the Spirit of God is busy at work. These are the signs that can transform our lives and our church with a dynamic force that nothing in all the world could stop.”* Wow, that’s preaching. If you weren’t here last week, it’s not too late to get a copy, or to watch it on YouTube.

Over the next five weeks, we’ll be looking at all these characteristics more closely, starting today with the first four: Compassion, Kindness, Humility, and Meekness. I call these four, “Signs of the Heart.” These particular signs are not warning signs, though; they’re signs of the Spirit of God working within.

And the first is Compassion. And what does the word “compassion” mean? Well, this is where it gets interesting: to quote one of the great films of the last century, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” Most people today, when asked to define the word, would agree with Webster: “A deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the wish to relieve it.” And that’s not bad; but it isn’t really what compassion is. That definition is closer to empathy, which is an understanding of another person’s feelings; or sympathy, which is sharing the feelings of another person. Empathy says, “I know just how you feel.” Sympathy says, “You’re feeling sorrow, and I am feeling sorrow with you.” And those are important human qualities.

But compassion raises the bar another notch. Compassion literally means, to participate in the suffering of another person. To be there with them. To not only understand their suffering, to not only be moved to pity by their suffering, but to be there with them as they suffer, experiencing their suffering, and doing what you can to come through it together. You can feel empathy and sympathy and remain at arm’s length; compassion, though, means you’re right in there. You’re with them.

For example: You go to the hospital, to visit a friend. They are hooked up to this machine and that machine, this tube and the other. You may have had a similar experience in the past. You’re reminded of it, and the feelings you had when you were ill. You understand, at least a bit. That’s empathy. But it is your friend, and you care about them, and you’re sorry to see them this way. That’s sympathy.

But now the difference: imagine, instead, in that bed, hooked up to those machines, is your child. God forbid. You not only know how they feel, you not only feel sorry for them, but it is as though you are in that bed, hooked up to those machines with them, experiencing every up and down, ache and pain they do. You're not going to leave their side. You're going to do whatever it takes, whatever it costs, to see them through this time, and if it is a kidney they need, or a liver, or a lung, they can have yours, without hesitation. And you'll whisper in their ear, "I'm here, don't worry, I'm here. You're not alone. I'm right here." That's compassion. See the difference?

Now get this: Compassion is precisely the feeling, the relationship, God has towards us. The Bible talks about it time and again; here's a few examples of the eighty or so I could quote:

(Isaiah 49:13-15) Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones... "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!"

(Psalms 103:13) As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

(Psalms 116:5-6) The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The LORD protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, he saved me.

(Matthew 9:36) When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

(2 Corinthians 1:3-4) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.

And so on. You shouldn't be allowed to say something as trite as "and so on" after verses like those, though; it is awe-inspiring and humbling to think that the God who created all the universe has feelings towards us like this. Knows our aches, our pains, our sorrows, or grief. And suffers, sorrows and grieves with us. Beside us. Within us. Holds us in his arms, never letting go. That's God. That's God.

And that, says Paul, is us. We can be to others as God has been to us. We can share one another's journeys, when those journeys are filled with sunshine, as well as when the path takes us through the valley of the shadow of death. To know we are not alone; to know God's compassion; to experience God's loving care through the care of one another; that is what we are all about. That is what it means to be a compassionate church, a church

filled with the Spirit of God. And when we are compassionate towards one another, that's a sign that the Spirit of God is at work and alive in our hearts.

Compassion is how to get along through suffering, difficulty and turmoil. Kindness, number two on our list, is how to treat each other day to day. It lays the groundwork for compassion. It is another word, though, difficult to define: What does kindness mean? The dictionary cheated here: it defined "kindness" as "the act of being kind." I hope you did better than that. "Treating another with consideration," isn't bad. "Acting towards another person with their best interests at heart," is maybe the best I can do as a definition, and close to the best I can do in life. It comes very close to Jesus' "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," doesn't it?

I'm going to get personal with you for a moment. When Dana and I were newly married, my parents gave to us a piece of advice which they said guided their marriage, and which we have taken to heart, leading up to 38 years of happy marriage. It is this: They said, "Be kind to each other." That's a piece of advice to basic, so simple, that it is almost embarrassing to share: "Be kind to each other." You learn that in Kindergarten, don't you? But here's something more: BE kind to each other. BE. BE kind. EMBODY kindness. That's an active, not a passive kindness. BEING kind looks for opportunities to treat one another like we would wish to be treated ourselves. Often, we treat the golden rule as a prohibition: "Don't do unto others what you wouldn't want done to you." But it isn't a prohibition, it is an encouragement: "DO unto others." Do. Be. Active, not passive.

We often acts as though Kindness simply means not bothering somebody, or simply leaving the other person alone. Back to the Princess Bride: "I do not think it means what you think it means." Kindness means interacting with people, being of help and service to them, welcoming them, befriending them, extending your hand to them, creatively thinking of ways to be a blessing to them. You don't believe me? OK, when was the last time you thought, "Gee, what a kind thing that person has done." Or, "Why, how kind of them!" Did you think it or say it of someone who simply left you alone? I doubt you have often said, "It was very kind of you not to send me a card when I was sick," or, "How kind of you not to invite me for lunch" unless you were being sarcastic. We think of one another as "kind" when we are actively extending consideration towards one another. Kindness is active, not passive.

You're familiar with the phrase "random acts of kindness?" How wonderful when such a thing is happening – someone being kind to you, just out of the blue. It can make your day. It can make your week! But Jesus wasn't famous for random acts of kindness. Jesus was famous for intentional acts of kindness. And that is what Paul is talking about here – intentional kindness. Ask yourself - How can you be kind to someone here, someone to whom you've never really expressed kindness before? I'll give you a moment. Now, stop thinking, and do it! Be intentional! That's what it means to be a church where

kindness is practised, not just thought! And when we are acting – ACTING - in kindness towards one another – intentionally - that’s a sign that the Spirit of God is at work and alive in our hearts.

OK, two more. Humility and meekness. Once again, more definitions are needed, because we most often get these wrong. We’ll start with “humility” – what do you think that might mean? We think of it as being very close to “humiliation” or being “humiliated,” neither of which are things we want, so do we really want humility? What is it, anyway? Well, the Apostle Paul himself gives us a pretty good definition. Try this out:

(Philippians 2:3-5 NIV) Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

Humility is, as Paul points out, the very opposite of selfish ambition, of vain conceit. It is looking at the needs of others as more important than our own. It is like kindness in that regard, but with an added component: Kindness plus willing service, perhaps. Once again, the key here is the teaching of Jesus. Paul says, “*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus,*” and Jesus lived to be of service to others. There’s a beautiful passage of Scripture to illustrate this, where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, taking the role of servant among them. Let me just give you a brief glimpse of it:

(John 13:12-17 NIV) When he had finished washing their feet, he returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Jesus knew who he was, and he knew his status within the group. But that didn’t mean he waited for people to serve him: Jesus actively and intentionally (there’s that word again) sought out opportunities to be of service to others. Humility means not considering yourself of greater importance over another; but it also means not letting your sense of importance prevent you from being of service to another. Humility is a reinforcement, a further development, of compassion and kindness. Humility is taking the initiative, taking the role of Servant, no matter our sense of self-importance. Or another way of saying it: Being of service to another, no matter whose turn it is.

Finally, Meekness. This is an important one: Jesus, in the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, said so: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,” Who are the meek? What is it to be meek? Why will they inherit the earth?

What does “meek” mean? Well, once again, “I do not think it means what you think it means.” First of all, don’t equate “meek” with “weak.” Don’t equate “meek” with powerless, or spineless, or cowardly. That’s not meek. Real meekness is something else. Real meekness is close to real humility – the two words are often used interchangeably in Scripture - it means taking into consideration the needs and feelings of others before your own, whether or not you are actually entitled to being “first.” “Me first” is the opposite of meek. “You first,” is getting close. To be meek is not to demand your own rights and privileges, but to seek to see another person achieve theirs. The meek person seeks to see the other person shine.

Now, there’s a danger to humility and meekness. Some feel that to be humble and meek, you always stand back, you never come forward, you never put up your hand when the opportunity to volunteer comes up. But that’s not being humble or meek – that’s being inert. Remember, true compassion, true kindness is active, not passive. True humility and true meekness are active too, not passive. They seek to serve. True humility, true meekness, says, “There is a task that needs to be done, and none are doing it. But I’m not too self-important to do that task, I’m not too good to do it, and my busy-ness and time are not of greater value and more importance than this task. I will serve. I will volunteer. I will reach out to this person. Not because I am great, but because, in all humility and meekness, in all compassion and kindness, I am willing.”

That is what it means to be a church composed of the humble and the meek, a church filled with the Spirit of God. And when we are humble and meek towards one another, seeking always to build one another up, that’s a sign that the Spirit of God is at work and alive in our hearts.

Chest pain. Shortness of breath. A sick feeling. Dread. These are signs that there’s something wrong with our heart, and we need help. Compassion. Kindness. Humility. Meekness. These are signs that there’s something right with our heart, that the Spirit of God is there, and that we can be of help, a blessing to our church, and to all the world. That’s what these words mean. Pray for these signs in your heart, in your life, in your church. Because,

“A life that is giving evidence of all these things is a life in which the Spirit of God is busy at work. A church that is giving evidence of all these things is a church in which the Spirit of God is busy at work. These are the signs that can transform our lives and our church with a dynamic force that nothing in all the world could stop.” Amen.