

Kinds of Kindness

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Primary Scripture: Romans 2:1–5

INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

Good morning, Menlo Church, and welcome back to our series, *Repentance for the Rest of Us*. It has already been a really meaningful conversation one week in, and a special thanks to Vince Vitale for bringing our message last week. If you missed it, I would highly encourage you to go back and take a listen.

I also want to recognize that you have heard it from your campus pastor already, but this is ACM weekend for us. Sometimes this is a separate church business meeting, but for us, we do it inside our services at all four campuses, all at the same time.

First, we get to confirm elder nominations from our elders and nominating advisory committee, reflecting the months of prayerful work and preparation that have gone into it. We release an annual report that gives you a high-level overview of what God has done in our community over the last year, and you can find it at menlo.church/connect.

There is also a place for you to ask questions. You can submit those at that same link, and we record a special podcast released today with your questions answered. Now, these votes specifically are for covenant partners of Menlo Church. That is how we describe membership. Covenant partners are people who are simply engaged followers of Jesus that call Menlo Church home.

I want to share some updates I am really excited about, mostly related to our Hope for Everyone initiative. We have a special weekend in just a couple of weeks, and there is some good news coming in that conversation that I am holding until then.

Now, if you are wondering why we would talk about all of that or why we would name this stuff at the top of a service like this, this is really just a church trying to be honest about what God is doing and what is coming up in the life of our community.

This series is not just about what we pray in a prayer. It is not whether we are simply saying, "God, at one point in my life, I did this." It is about whether turning back to God is something we do continuously, or just something we did once.

And for the person who is new to faith or exploring faith, we get to do that together. God is still working. We need grace today as much as ever, no matter where you are in your faith. What I have often discovered is that the strongest, most mature followers of Jesus are more and more aware of their need for repentance and the grace of God the longer they follow Jesus. We are going to see some of that even in our study today.

Before we get going in our message today, I am going to pray for us. If you have never been here before or never heard me speak, before I speak, I pray kneeling. Because the God worth repenting to is the God worth surrendering to. He has already paid for all of what we need. He has already made the path available. The way is clear. So wherever you are in your faith, would you pray with me?

(Prayers)

RETHINKING KINDNESS

I am a child of the nineties, which means I have some very funny memories that sound kind of funny to younger people and to older people, but for very different reasons. As we think about the moral framework of what it meant to be a child of the nineties, one of my first formal instructions in moral philosophy came on a sticker on a VHS tape that read: "Be kind, rewind."

In order to make them ready for the next person, you rewound the tape you watched a movie on. Here is the thing: this was not a virtue, it was a policy. As a matter of fact, if you did not do it, there was a fine—fifty cents or a dollar, depending on how ruthless your local video store was. Kindness meant not leaving work for the next person.

Later, we learned to practice "random acts of kindness" or "choose kind." But over time, kindness stopped being an active virtue and became passive; it just meant "don't be mean." Then it mutated even more. The opposite of kind used to be cruel. Now the opposite of kind has become disagreeing with me. Tell me something I do not want to hear, and I do not experience you as being honest; I experience that as you being unkind.

Paul is about to say that God's kindness leads a person to repentance. If kindness means never making anyone uncomfortable, that sentence does not work. We have a version of kindness that cannot do what Paul says kindness does. We have a version of kindness that is about a prohibition, when Paul is telling us about a version of kindness that compels us to act.

We have learned in our culture a kind of kindness that costs nothing, so we built a repentance that costs nothing. It is really the same problem, and it just shows up in a couple of different ways.

THE TIME GAP BETWEEN SIN AND REPENTANCE

Let's talk about this right here in Silicon Valley. Maybe you have seen this kind of sticker before on the back of a lot of Teslas that basically says, "I bought this before we knew." There are a dozen versions of what happened with Elon Musk.

We see performative gestures all around us—statements or stickers that cost nothing and require no real change. On the flip side, others double down and apologize for nothing. One says sorry without changing; the other refuses to say sorry at all.

Longtime pastor and author R.T. Kendall once said: *"I would define a maturing Christian as closing the time gap between sin and repentance."* Kendall takes repentance out of the exclusive moment of conversion and puts it on the clock of your day, your week, your choices, and the consequences that go with them.

That would be an easy quote to give without an example, so let me challenge you:

How many hours have gone by between what you said to your spouse and you going back into the room to let them tell you how it felt? Or with your roommate, or with a good friend?

How many years have gone by between when you handled money poorly in that situation or business venture, and when you had an honest conversation about it that may come with consequences?

What is the lag for you between where you mess up and where you fess up? Where you are honest about what has happened, recognizing that honesty is going to come with consequences? The real question we need to ask ourselves is: what closes the gap for us?

There are some things we should be really clear that will not fix this. Shame will not fix this, or the world would be way better by now. We tried public shame, and we are still doing it on some levels; on the other hand, we have gotten to a place where some people seem to be living without any possibility of shame. Neither shame nor social pressure fixes this. Pressure only creates temporary compliance without a heart compelled to something greater.

GOD'S KINDNESS AND PATIENCE

Now I want to lean into a passage for a few minutes together, and it is from the book of Romans. We spend a lot of time in the book of Romans because it is the most complete picture of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, that we have in the Bible. It was written to a church that Paul never visited, and he is writing to a group of people living within a system in which their faith was at significant odds with the cultural promises all around it. Sound familiar? They were feeling the weight of what it meant to try to follow God as people who felt like foreigners even in their own zip code. Paul says it this way in Romans 2:

Romans 2:1–5

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.

The first word I want to talk about together is the word *presume*. It is really about assuming something without checking, or making a negative judgment about someone. The second word I want to look at is the word *leads*. Leads is an ongoing verb in Greek. It is never finished. It is not scheduled, and it is not waiting.

God is leading right now with His kindness—in the middle of this sentence, in the middle of your worst week, a difficult month, your job search, or that relationship falling apart. It is not standing at the finish line. It is not waiting until you get past this hurdle or until you clean yourself back up. This is a hand on your back the whole way up the hill you are currently climbing.

The two words that are pretty easy to read past in this passage are *forbearance* and *patience*. This is not Paul saying that God is just nice to you and me. He is saying that God is slow with you and me—that God's love for you and me is not in a hurry for us to get it all together.

That gap represents God's kindness. It is time that He is buying you at His own expense, and we read it kind of like a loophole or like God was so busy He missed it. Nothing happened, or nothing happened yet, so it must be just fine.

God is the ultimate unhurried friend. His patience with us is not indifference. It is the most purposeful thing about the way God relates to us. A being that exists outside of time leverages patience within it to call us back into relationship with Him.

GENERAL GRACE VS. PREVENIENT GRACE

Now there are two kinds of kindness I want to spend a few minutes breaking down:

- **General (or Common) Grace:** This is the kind of kindness that everyone here is already getting. One of the ways we see this in Scripture is through phrases like, "it rains on the just and on the unjust." Think about the nature of seasons—the sun comes up and goes down, your lungs continue to function without your supervision all the time, or a kid laughs at something at your table this week. Every person in this building is swimming in an ocean of God's kindness all the time.
- **Prevenient Grace:** There is also another kind of kindness called prevenient grace. It is the kind of kindness that goes out ahead of you. It gets there before you do. It works on you before you even realize it—the song that got past your defenses this last week, the friend who said something they did not know was loaded, or the unplanned conversation God used to show you who Jesus is.

Now, in our culture, there is a question I think we have to ask in moments like this: Why does God do it this way? Why does God deliver repentance this way when fear would be so much faster?

Think about it. Everything around us all the time is prompting us toward fear. Both sides of the aisle are trying to pit us against the other. Ideologies and groups of people are playing on fear as fast as they can.

But here, I think, is the main reason God does not use it that way: fear works until it doesn't. Fear might get us temporary compliance, but it will never compel us to be who God created us to be. Fear-based religion does not produce better people; it produces better hiding.

If we think about the very first humans shown in the Scriptures, in the Garden of Eden, the first thing that fear ever did to a human being was make them hide. God Himself is walking through the garden, and Adam is in the trees. God asks a question that He already knows the answer to. Then, before anything is resolved, God makes them clothes in kindness.

Fear will change you for now. Kindness will change you for good.

A TALE OF TWO FIRES

We see this very thing play out so many times in the life and ministry of Jesus, and I want to show you two different fires to give you this picture.

The first one comes in John 18. Jesus has been arrested, and Peter follows Him at a distance into a courtyard. The courtyard is so cold that he warms his hands at a fire. Three times while he is at that fire, he does what he told Jesus