

Our Place at His Place

Stern Kindness

July 19, 2020

Welcome to where we're learning how to balance kindness and sternness, ours and God's!

Are you afraid of facing Jesus? Even a little? If not, **is it confidence or arrogance?**

Because, **ignorance will deceive us**; whereas **wisdom will secure us and assure us**.

[Jesus said] I am the True Vine, and My Father is the *Gardener*. [You know why we should think of God as the *Gardener*, right? *Home – Garden of Eden* – that was all Him. That's why Jesus prayed in a garden, was betrayed in a garden, and rose in a garden. Know what kind? Rose garden. And Mary, the first to see Him risen mistook Him for ... *what? The gardener!*] He cuts off *every branch in Me* that bears *no* fruit [Zero. None], while every branch that *does* bear fruit [even just one berry] He *prunes* so that it will be even more fruitful. [Wait; *that's* the choice? Cut off or pruned? Where's the branch that He *coddles*?] ... you *are* the branches. If a man *remains* in Me [in right relationship] and I in *him*, [What do you think *that* means?] he *will* bear *much* fruit ... If you remain in Me and My *words* remain in you [Oh. *There's* what *that* means] ... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear *much* fruit, *showing* yourselves to be My disciples. – John 15:1-8 NIV

I think, as believers, **we can get ignorantly, arrogantly, comfortable with the Christian status quo**. And we could use a jolt now and then. *Oh, Paul!*



Do not be *arrogant*, but be *afraid*. For if God did not spare the natural branches, [Paul pictures Israel as an olive tree] He will not spare you either. [So “be afraid”. “But, I thought perfect love *drives out* fear.” (1 Jn 4:18) It does. But that requires wisdom. And *driving* is a process, with a starting point. And Scripture is quite clear that our “*fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*” (Prov 1:7)] Consider therefore the kindness and *sternness* of God: sternness to those who fell [from true faith in the True Vine], but kindness to you, *provided* that you *continue* in His kindness. Otherwise, you also *will* be cut off. – Romans 11:20b-22 NIV

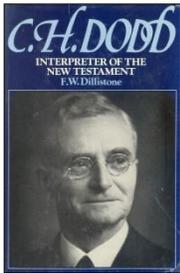
Obviously, **He expects to find *much* righteous fruit on us “branches”**. And, FYI:

[Isaiah said, long before Jesus died and rose, that] The *fruit* of righteousness will be *peace*; [which is why it's so vital that we are peacemakers. And] the *effect* of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever. – Isaiah 32:17 NIV

Paul goes on to say, regarding us gentiles who've been grafted into God's family tree, *that*:

You were cut out of an olive tree that is *wild* by nature, and *contrary* to nature were grafted into [along with the NT] a *cultivated* [by the OT] olive tree, – Romans 11:24 NIV

Except, as many commentaries seem to enjoy pointing out, olive farmers *don't* graft wild branches onto cultivated trees. Just the opposite. They graft cultivated branches onto *wild* trees. It doesn't work the other way 'round because each branch produces its own fruit.



According to theologian C.H. Dodd: "Paul had the limitations of the town-bred man ... and he had not the curiosity to inquire what went on in the olive-yards which fringed every road he walked."



So, what do *you* think? Was Paul just an ignorant city boy? Of course not. Paul is totally letting *us* know that *he* knows that what he's describing is *unusual*; "contrary to nature" even. Most commentaries give Paul a pass for his "ignorance" by noting that he's teaching theology, not horticulture, and therefore has poetic license to say something stupid. That's not exactly how *they* word it.

But, turns out Paul, and the Creator of the Universe, get the last laugh; because, an ancient grafting technique was rediscovered by Nobel Prize winner Sir William Ramsay, who found that: When a *cultivated* [olive] tree ceases to produce *any* fruit, it can be "reinvigorated" by grafting a *wild* shoot into *it*.

So, *how* do we keep our faith firmly attached, and bear the righteous fruit of peacemaking, in order to turn our ignorant arrogance into quiet confidence in Christ? Paul just told us:

"Consider therefore the kindness *and* sternness of God"



You see, **we tend to stress one aspect of God's nature.**

Would you ever tell a small child *only* that the stove is our friend? It makes yummy cookies, and pops popcorn. It's our *pal*.



No. As we grow, we learn that our stove is not only an awesome appliance, that makes great foods and fills our home with aromas, but also that it'll burn us, with hot oil and foil and metal, if we don't respect and revere the very *elements* that makes it what it is. That's why it's called Revere Ware!

Awareness of one balances our awareness of the other.

If we choose to focus *only* on **Uncle God's kindness**, we'll quickly start to see Him as a big ol' softy on sin; because, **all kindness produces liberalistic self-condoning**. And we'll fail, to our own detriment, to notice how alarmingly, powerfully (it turns out), He opposes our sin.

[For instance] If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a *fearful* expectation of judgment and of *raging fire* that will consume the enemies of God. – Hebrews 10:26-27 NIV

In Hosea (7:4-6), God compares it to an oven – and himself to a baker! So, **do you have an appropriate balancing fear of the Lord?** Or is He just your ol' pal? The big guy upstairs?

Now, on the flip side, **all sternness produces legalistic self-condemning**. If we focus *only* on **General God's sternness**, we'll fail to find the joy of our salvation, or to feel the forgiveness He so freely offers, or to appreciate that:

There is now *no condemnation* for those who are *in* Christ Jesus, – Romans 8:1 NIV

All kindness produces liberalistic self-condoning. All sternness produces legalistic self-condemning. But, **well balanced stern kindness produces peace**. Which tendency do you tend to lean toward?



According to Jesus' beatitude that we looked at last week, **God blesses those who work for peace**. (Mt 5:9) So if you're not feeling very blessed lately, better check your rating on that peacemaker-troublemaker scale from last Sunday. True peace is so essential, that **Jesus gives harmony priority over church worship**. He said:



If you are offering your gift at the altar and *there* [while rightly judging yourself with our loving Father's help] remember that your *brother* [rightly or wrongly] has something against you, leave your gift [your symbolic gift] there in front of the altar. [God doesn't want it ... yet] First go and [offer your true gift, and] be reconciled ... – Matthew 5:23-24 NIV

We also saw last Sunday, how we've been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. So, it's fairly, painfully, ironic for Christ's "Ambassadors of Reconciliation" to this world, to attempt to worship the Lord while blatantly ignoring what direly needs reconciling in our own life.



So, here are some quick recommendations for reconciliation.

Take the initiative ASAP. Make the first move and make contact fast, whether it's your fault or not. Because, **delay only deepens resentment**. And, the hardest part of any reconciling is getting the ball rolling; so text, call, or email, and just say, "**Can-we-get-together-and-talk-about-this?**"



Do that and the battle's half won. And, this is the one time it would be right and good to use our cellphone during church!



But now, **don't go in to convince or condemn**. Go in to (*Listen close*) to listen close. **Use your ears 2 to 1 over your mouth**. Remember, **we can sympathize with those with whom we disagree**. And *that's* when a minor miracle occurs. Because, when *they* know that *you* understand how *they* feel, they're *far* more likely to *really* listen to how *you* feel. And *that* feels amazing!

Whatever your offense, right or wrong, intentional or unintentional or imagined, **confess your part with humble honesty**. This is called "removing the log from our own eye" (or, if you were here two weeks ago: removing the cookies from our purse!).

And remember: **we can't make excuses while making peace**. God has called *you* to be a peacemaker, not an excuse-maker. So *do* it (peacemaking), and *don't* do it (excuse making).

And after this, if *you've been* offended, you'll need to **express your hurt with tender honesty**. If *you* attack they *will* defend. So, **attack the problem, not the person**. This means dumping our relational nuclear arsenal: **sarcasm** and **insults** and **comparisons** and **belittling**.



“But I got nut’n left!” Well, just try to keep in mind that **we're never persuasive when we're abrasive**. Get it? We need to be gentle in the tender areas, when cleaning up the messes we, and those around us, inevitably make as a regular part of life down below.



We have a *great* memory when it comes to those who've offended *us*. But, we tend to quickly forget about the offenses we've *caused*. So, **don't mistake a poor memory for a clear conscience!** When you go before the Lord, ask Him to help you recollect those situations and persons with which He'd have you **“go and be reconciled”**.

But, this kind of mature peacemaking requires true, Christ-like love ... and a little *fear*.

Did you happen to notice, that although we're to **“consider” both “kindness and sternness”**, we **“continue” only “in His kindness”**. As believers, we don't “continue in” God's sternness. That's a starting point for wisdom in our relationship. However, ongoing *consideration* of His sternness will send us running to re-embrace the security of His kindness that He offers so freely.



Have you heard about or been to the glass-floored tourist Skywalk 4000 feet above the Grand Canyon? You see, **terror becomes awe when viewed from a safe position**. The Lord doesn't want His children terrified. He wants us awe-struck. **We were created to be safely afraid of God**. Confident, but not complacent.



Like the glass skywalk China built, 4,000 feet up on the side of a cliff. And then, because apparently they don't sue in China, added glass cracking sound and visual effects. Get the defibrillators ready!



It's easy to forget how horrifically dependent we are on our merciful Father's grace. So, it's good to consider it; to recalibrate, defibrillate, and then continue in His loving kindness – quietly confident that fresh awareness of His sternness causes us to cling to the safety of His mighty lion-hearted kindheartedness, like the railing on a glass skywalk.

God is love. And, **love is something more stern than kindness**. You see, **kindness wants to numb pain or alleviate suffering**. That's why a kind vet might shoot a horse.

But love is deeper. More complicated. **Love longs to help face pain to walk through it**. Kindness cares only that pain is removed, *not* that healing is attained, or righteousness achieved.

People mostly want a tame God – a kindly Santa God who grants forgiveness and dispenses mercy without demanding change. But **that’s a perverse desire for less love** rather than more.

It would not be a loving act, for our Gardner God to let us branches off the hook – His pruning hook, that is – when our desire for comfort causes us to wither away, and rot on the vine.



The olive tree is incredibly slow-growing, requiring incredible persistence and patience from a determined farmer. **Our Father is a very forgiving grafter and patient pruner.** So let’s get to work and do our job as wild branches that bear the peacemaking fruit of righteousness, that reinvigorates this world with the stern kindness of the true love of the True Vine.

So, be sure to verify that He’s got a “branch office” in your neck of the woods.