

THE COMPASS

Mindless Kindness

Untidy Christianity, Part 9

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True story.

In an ancient kingdom, there's a vicious, bloody war.

It's chaos everywhere.

The king is under siege.

The crown prince is in the battlefield with him.

The enemy is notorious for its army of assassins.

They're slaughtering the king's soldiers, they get to the prince and murder him, they're closing in on the king — and rather than be tortured and killed, he commits suicide.

Back at the palace, the wives and children of the royal family are terrified.

News reaches them that the king and the prince are both dead, and the killers are on their way.

The women and servants grab as many possessions as they can, and scoop up the little children, to run for their lives.

One of the servants is a nanny. We don't know her name.

All we know from history is that she was responsible for the king's grandson, one of the sons of the crown prince.

Five years old.

As the alarm sounds, there's panic, people are yelling, running back and forth — and the nanny picks up the boy. Of course he could walk, but there's no time.

But as she flees the palace, she loses her grip on the child.

He crashes to the ground.

We don't know if she was on a palace stairway or a high place of some sort — but both of the boy's feet are badly damaged.

The nanny manages to get him up and get him out — they escape the palace and get out of the city.

But the boy never walks again.

His name is Mephibosheth. His dead father: Jonathan. His dead grandfather, the king: Saul. The kingdom hanging in the balance: Israel. It's 1056 B.C.

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By some miracle, the army of assassins, the Philistines, are turned back — but with both the king and the crown prince dead in battle, the kingdom descends into a bloody civil war.

The religious leader of Israel, an old prophet named Samuel, has anointed King Saul's son-in-law, David, to be the new king.

But Saul has a surviving son, Jonathan's brother, Ish-bosheth, who announces that he will be king.

Part of the country is under the control of David's army. The rest of the country is under

the control of Ish-bosheth's army.
 And young Mephibosheth, the disabled boy, is growing up in the care of his uncle, the king, Ish-bosheth.

But misfortune is following this child.

One warm day, King Ish-bosheth is taking a nap, and two of his own men slip in to his bedroom, stab him in the stomach, and cut off his head.

The civil war comes to a sudden end — David is named king over the whole country — but young Mephibosheth, at the age of 12, has to flee for his life again.

Somehow Mephibosheth, the disabled one, slips out of the country secretly, with various servants and friends who are loyal to the house of Saul.

Nobody in David's camp even knows he's alive.

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As Mephibosheth is racing away from trouble, David is heading into it.

He can't just march into Jerusalem and take over the country; there's a hitch.

Jerusalem, sitting near the border between Ish-bosheth's region and David's region, is under the control of a third group, called Jebusites.

In order to truly secure control of the nation of Israel, David and his armies will have to go into Jerusalem and defeat the Jebusites — something that has been tried repeatedly down through the years but never achieved.

In fact, the Jebusites are cocky about their invincibility.

And even back then, 3,000 years ago, they have something like political propaganda:

The Jebusites actually send a message to David that says, "You will not get in here; even the blind and the lame can ward you off."

They're trying to intimidate the Israelite army.

But it kind of backfires.

David adopts their phrase, "the blind and the lame."

He starts referring to the Jebusites not as the Jebusites, but as "the blind and the lame."

It gets to be kind of a national joke, a catchphrase.

Everybody's talking about "the blind and the lame."

And sure enough, David and his guys run the Jebusites out of Jerusalem — the first time in history it's ever been done.

* * *

Now David solidifies his power and position.

He defeats the Philistines.

He brings the ark of the covenant, the primary symbol of God's relationship with the people, to Jerusalem.

He defeats the Moabites.

He defeats the Zobahites.

He defeats the Arameans who come to help the Zobahites.

He defeats the Edomites.

All the countries that had threatened Israel are dealt with.

Finally, David settles in to his palace.

Finally, he has rest from all his enemies.

I couldn't blame him for kicking back and taking a break.

Let the servant girls bring him some grapes and pamper him a little bit.

But David doesn't take this approach to the power God has invested in him.

God has blessed him, he's honored him, he's given him tremendous resources — and David puts them to work.

2 Samuel 9

1 David asked, "Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?"

A few weeks ago we studied the covenant that David and Jonathan made — they were both in line to become king, but they promised that whichever one of them ended up as king, he wouldn't destroy the other guy's family.

This was a very serious promise, and truly extraordinary — because in those days, the new king automatically destroyed the other guy's family.

2 Now there was a servant of Saul's household named Ziba. They called him to appear before David, and the king said to him, "Are you Ziba?"

"Your servant," he replied.

3 The king asked, "Is there no one still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show God's kindness?"

This is not really a clear translation — and it's important to understand exactly what David was asking, because in this question he is reflecting one of God's attributes that we are called to express in our own lives.

To be more exact, King David is asking: "Isn't there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness like that of God?"

David is not just trying to be a nice guy, well thought of, everybody's favorite king.

He wants to show the God-type of kindness.

The variety of kindness that God shows to human beings.

What kind of kindness is that?

David proceeds to show us.

In the rest of verse 3,

Ziba answered the king, "There is still a son of Jonathan; he is crippled in both feet."

David must have felt a pang when he heard this.

He was famous for sneering at "the blind and the lame."

Using disabled people as a symbol of hubris, of foolishness ... using "the blind and the lame" as a kind of code phrase, or shorthand, for his enemies.

This whole enterprise would have been far easier if Jonathan's son turned out to be strong and handsome and healthy.

In the culture of the day, the lame were regarded as a kind of embarrassment.

But David pressed on:

4 “Where is he?” the king asked.

Ziba answered, “He is at the house of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar.”

We can skip the geography lesson, but I’ll tell you, he’s way far from Jerusalem.

5 So King David had him brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel.

What is the God-type of kindness?

God’s thing is ***proactive kindness***.

David did not wait for opportunities to be kind.

Amy Godfrey of Glendale sent this in to the *Arizona Republic*:

Thank you to the man in his 20s who willingly gave up his flu vaccine at the Safeway on 51st and Olive streets ... so my 5-1/2-year-old son could get his vaccine. My mother-in-law told us how all the numbers had already been given out ... and of your generosity. Thank you so much to “No. 88.”

A lovely act of kindness. Beautiful example of selflessness.

But No. 88 didn’t head down to the Safeway looking for someone to sacrifice his flu shot for.

The opportunity came his way, and he responded honorably. More than honorably.

In our previous studies of the life of King David, we’ve seen how he likewise responded honorably when opportunities presented themselves to him.

But David also went further.

When God brought this idea to his mind, he took the initiative.

I could see him suddenly imagining that some of Saul’s descendants might still be alive, and saying to himself,

“Hey, wow, you know what? If any of those guys ever turn up, I’m going to surprise them by not cutting off their heads.”

But David was proactive in his kindness — he went looking for a way to express God’s love.

This is what God did for me too.

He came looking for me.

Even when I was running the other direction, hiding out, hoping against hope that there really was no God — he came after me.

He found me.

He didn’t have me brought from Lo Debar, from the house of Makir son of Ammiel.

But he did have me brought from where I was — spiritually crippled, emotionally lame.

I’m grateful — because I *need* a God whose kindness is proactive.

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I can’t tell you what went through Mephibosheth’s mind when he got the news that King David had summoned him to Jerusalem.

But I can imagine his stomach turning flip-flops.

He had avoided death, not once but twice, he had spent almost his entire life hiding out — and now, as the last descendant on the losing side of the civil war, he was going to be carried into the new king’s palace and — most probably — executed.

6 When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan, the son of Saul, came to David, he bowed down to pay him honor.

David said, “Mephibosheth!”

“Your servant,” he replied.

I think David could tell that Mephibosheth was terrified.

7 “Don’t be afraid,” David said to him, “for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table.”

8 Mephibosheth bowed down and said, “What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?”

Which was an eloquent, ancient Hebrew way of saying, “With all due respect, Your Highness, this does not make sense.”

But David didn’t care. Because he wanted to express kindness “like that of God.”

God’s thing is *irrational kindness*.

It doesn’t have to make sense.

It just is.

1 John 4:16 is the famous “**God is love**” verse of the Bible. We’ve heard this quotation a million times.

But the first part of the verse hardly ever gets quoted: this verse begins by saying, “**...We know and rely on the love God has for us.**”

We need God’s love, we couldn’t survive without it — and we need for his love for us to be irrational, because if we had to make the case for it, if we had to deserve it, we could never get it.

Romans 5:8 says “**God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**”

Not after we got good. Not after we shaped up. Before.

David could have said, Hey, that Jonathan thing was a long time ago. This is now. I don’t really Mephibosheth anything.

God could have said, Hey, Doug Brendel isn’t really bringing much to the table. He has busted my design a million times, and he’s going to again. I don’t really owe him anything.

But David’s kindness to Mephibosheth was irrational.

God’s kindness to me was irrational.

I’m so grateful — because I *need* an irrationally kind God!

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Finally, David demonstrates a third aspect of “kindness like that of God.”

9 Then the king summoned Ziba, Saul’s servant, and said to him, “I have given your master’s grandson everything that belonged to Saul and his family. 10 You and your sons and your servants are to farm the land for him and bring in the crops, so that your master’s grandson may be provided for. And

Mephibosheth, grandson of your master, will always eat at my table.” (Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.)

11 Then Ziba said to the king, “Your servant will do whatever my lord the king commands his servant to do.” So Mephibosheth ate at David’s table like one of the king’s sons.

12 Mephibosheth had a young son named Mica, and all the members of Ziba’s household were servants of Mephibosheth. 13 And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king’s table, and he was crippled in both feet.

David did not express kindness up to a point, and then cut it off.

He might have said, “Well, I only meant Saul and Jonathan’s blood relatives.”

He might have said, “Whoa, this is gonna be too complicated — I mean, it’s not only Mephibosheth, but there’s his kid, and his servant, and his servant has 15 sons and 20 *other* servants.”

He might have said, “Hold it right there: Mephibosheth has a son? And he’s not disabled like his father? That makes him a threat to my throne.”

But David didn’t take any of these approaches.

He went the opposite direction.

He not only expressed kindness, but he went the extra mile to ensure that his kindness would endure ... that the blessings he was bringing into Mephibosheth’s life would be lasting.

David was expressing “kindness like that of God.”

God’s kindness is an **extra-measure kindness**.

God didn’t just do the minimum for me.

He didn’t just pull my fat out of the eternal fire — although he sure did that: he guaranteed that I would live forever with him; he guaranteed it by sacrificing his own Son. (We can hardly call that “the minimum.”)

It was a tremendous, horrible gift. Who could have blamed him if he stopped right there?

He could have set it up so Jesus was just a fact of history, and I could accept his sacrifice and ensure my eternal future, but then I’d be on my own for the rest of my life.

Living by my own wits. Wretched, lonely, worried.

But that’s not what God did. He didn’t stop at Christ’s crucifixion. He didn’t stop at the Resurrection. He went further.

He gave me his own Spirit, as an ongoing gift — a constant companion. A supernatural source of comfort, and wisdom, and power.

In John 14, Jesus says the Spirit will teach me, he will remind me of what Jesus said and did, he’ll give me a sense of peace — and he’ll live inside of me; I won’t have to go to some special place to hook up with him, he won’t be on a limited schedule — and he will never, ever leave me.

In John 16, Jesus actually says it’s better that he left the earth in his human form and the Spirit came in as his replacement — it’s more “expedient,” the King James translation says.

Because Jesus as a human being could only be one place at a time, but the Spirit can work in the whole world simultaneously.

My friend Sharon Colyer uses the term “separtaneously” — separately but simultaneously.

That’s how God’s Spirit operates: he’s doing different kinds of work in different people, but all at the same time.

Whatever you needed today, the Spirit of God was there for you.

I didn’t necessarily need what you needed today; I needed something different.

But the Spirit of God was there for me too.

This is God’s kindness to us in extra measure.

He is willing to tromp through life with us, get involved in the details, walk with us and talk with us — it’s amazing, really.

He’s the creator of the whole universe!

We are eminently ignorable — and the gift he gave us in the form of his Son Jesus Christ was more than we could ever have asked for or hoped for — and yet he keeps reaching out to us.

* * *

So what is my response to God’s kindness?

How do I express what King David called “kindness like that of God”?

I’m trying to think of the last time I was proactively kind ... the last time I specifically looked for a way to express compassion or benevolence or thoughtfulness to someone.

Generally I’m so busy, I don’t think in terms of proactive kindness.

It’s all I can do to be kind when the opportunities present themselves.

I need God’s Spirit to nudge me on this, to bring ideas to mind, to present me with scenarios where I can step into someone else’s life and express “kindness like that of God.”

How long has it been since I expressed irrational kindness?

The kind of response to a person that doesn’t calculate.

A sort of kindness that just goes for it.

Maybe it’s kindness expressed to someone who doesn’t really deserve it.

Or someone who isn’t really all that close to me.

Someone who I don’t really have a long history with.

Personally, I think I may do a little better on irrational kindness than I do on proactive kindness.

I have a little bit of a reputation with my family and friends for this sort of thing.

The Browns were at our house one day this past summer; we had grilled burgers and dogs and we had way too much food.

And two guys, Carlos and Domingo, came to the door. They had painted a new house number on our curb, along with a really good-looking little American flag, and they were ready for me to pay them.

And I said, “Aren’t you guys hungry? Come in and eat with us.”

Their faces lit up!

They might have thought it was a little weird, but they were apparently hungry enough to

come in and have some burgers.
 We talked, we laughed, we ate together, it was fun.
 It wasn't anything but a small kindness. And kind of irrational.

And then, how do I express extra-measure kindness?
 My nature doesn't really lend itself to extra-measure kindness.
 My nature lends itself to the kindness of convenience.
 Let's do a nice thing, and then let's let that be enough, okay?
 "Hey, I did my part." That kind of feeling.
 I'm too busy. Too preoccupied. Whatever is already consuming my attention is too important.

But the richest way I can live is to live a life of extra-measure kindness.
 A life that's willing to go the extra mile once in a while.

In the years that Mephibosheth spent living in Jerusalem and eating at the king's table,
 David's life zigzagged.

He had good times and bad. He was popular, then he was unpopular.
 At one point a number of years later, David's own son Absalom tried to pull off a coup d'état.

David had to vacate the palace with a handful of loyal subjects just to save their own lives.

His stock had fallen so far that as they headed out of town, a guy ran alongside the royal party screaming curses and showering David with rocks and dirt.

And yet, when the uprising ended and David headed back into Jerusalem, who came to greet him on the road?

There was Mephibosheth — and he looked, and smelled, terrible.

His hair was long, his clothes reeked, even his toenails were long and gross.

David asked him, in **2 Samuel 19:25**, "Mephibosheth, why didn't you go with me?"
 And Mephibosheth told him the story.

On the day the king and his company had scrambled out of the palace, Mephibosheth couldn't help himself, because of his disability. So he ordered his servant Ziba to saddle up his donkey, so he could go with David.

But Ziba betrayed his master.

He left him stranded in the palace, and fled by himself.

From that day to this, Mephibosheth had grieved for his absent friend, the king.

From the day David fled the palace, he had refused to shave, or trim his nails, or wash his clothes.

It was an extreme expression of bereavement in that culture.

In fact, here's what had happened in the meantime:

Ziba abandoned Mephibosheth, left the palace, and made his way out of town to where David was.

He brought the king a bunch of presents, supplies and stuff for his entourage, and then Ziba told the king a very different story.

He said Mephibosheth had decided to stay behind because he thought David was going

to lose the kingdom, and Saul's family would get back in power. David believed Ziba's story. He must have been heartbroken — to think that he had shown such kindness to Mephibosheth all these years, only to have him turn on him when he was down. And in that moment of deception, David granted Ziba everything Mephibosheth owned: his lands, his possessions, everything.

Now, a long time later, David's rebellious son Absalom has been killed, and the civil war is over.

David is coming back to the palace, and he sees Mephibosheth — in this terrible condition.

The way Mephibosheth looks and smells isn't something you can make up at the last minute.

It's suddenly clear to David that he has made a grave mistake. Mephibosheth has been loyal to him all along.

David, true to form, wants to express kindness. He wants to restore the stuff that he's taken away and given to Ziba.

But Mephibosheth stops him, with what I think is one of the loveliest lines in the Bible — in **2 Samuel 19:30**:

“Let him take everything, now that my lord the king has arrived home safely.”

Mephibosheth's relationship with David is kind of a picture of our relationship with God. In the beginning, Mephibosheth just needed him. He was helpless; he was hopeless. And David reached out to him.

But in the end, it's clear that he wasn't in this relationship just for the blessing. He wasn't just sucking up to David.

His willingness to give up everything demonstrates that he genuinely loved David.

In exactly the same way, when people first come to God, it's often for fire insurance — or it's because he saved our bacon from some terrible situation: “Oh God, help me!” And he helps us, and we cling to him.

But over time, as we do life with God, things change. Our motivations change.

We come to trust that he will do what's best for us.

So our prayers have less and less of that “Please give me” component, and more and more of an “I love you” component.

The great thing about walking with God is the relationship, not the stuff.

* * *

This is the last we ever hear from Mephibosheth.

His legacy is a legacy of gratitude, of loyalty, of rejoicing in “kindness like that of God.” He goes down in history as the object of proactive, irrational, extra-measure kindness — and a prime example of the impact that God's kindness can make on a person.

Who knows what kind of impact I could make tomorrow morning, by being proactively kind to someone?

Who knows how I might shape a life, maybe for eternity, by being irrationally kind to someone this weekend?

Who knows how some extra-measure kindness on my part, sometime this next week,

might rewrite the life story of someone who will cross my path ... so that years from now, they'll say, "That was the day my life turned a corner — God used that moment to set me in a new direction"?

I want "kindness like that of God" to be my commitment this evening....