

Basic Instincts

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[0 : 00] It was on July the 7th in the year 2005, between 8.50 in the morning and 9.47, that Islamic terrorists set off four suicide bombers, detonated their bombs in central London.

Three of them were on tube trains, and one of them was on a double-decker bus. That was the last of the bombs to go off. Just looking around, you're all old enough to remember that, although some of you might be too old to remember it, as a matter of fact.

Here's the thing. 52 people were killed, and over 700 people were injured. One of the people who was killed was a young woman called Jenny Nicholson.

Her mother was a colleague of mine in the Diocese of Bristol. She was a priest. And she attracted a lot of publicity, because the world was waiting to proclaim over her, you are bound to have lost your faith with that kind of thing going wrong in your life.

Julie never lost her faith, but she did feel that because she harbored feelings of resentment towards the Islamic terrorists, it would not be right for her to function as a priest until she had kind of aligned her soul with the terrible feelings of resentment that she had.

[1 : 31] The funeral was complicated by the fact that the heat on the tube train where Julie was killed went up to 2,600 degrees centigrade.

This means there was absolutely nothing left of a body in those temperatures. So they had no body to bury, no, nothing. In the end, through clever forensics, they identified that she was one who'd been killed.

And as I preached at the funeral service, I can remember thinking in the back of my mind, I wonder if Julie and her husband will ever get over this.

Of course, the answer to that is in one way, no. Because when something like that happens to you, you are, you know, I would think impacted forever.

It's just, can you align your soul so that you can live with the impact of what's happened? But I remember saying to Julie, actually just after the funeral, how's it going?

[2 : 39] I just want to read to you what she said to me. She said this, What keeps me going is the myriad of small kindnesses and goodness shown by people I don't even know.

Let me say that again. What keeps me going is the myriad of small kindnesses and goodness shown by people I don't even know.

I need to be honest with you. Today's theme, I changed the title of it because I thought if we stuck with it as it was, you might not come. It was, the theme is goodness and kindness.

I thought basic instincts sounded, especially to those of you who film buffs, a bit more interesting. But I may be on my own in that. The theme was kindness and goodness.

And my heart sank when I read that. You know, I'm like, this is motherhood and apple pie, isn't it? You know, who's going to sit in a church and say, you know, disagree with the idea that goodness and kindness are a bad idea?

[3 : 48] None of us. On the other hand, we all know that goodness and kindness is not always part of the way we respond. Who's going to disagree with that?

But listen, we all know there are times when our ability to be good and kind is severely tested.

Those of you who are in a marriage or in a long-term relationship will be only too aware that that can be, sadly, too often a kind of prominent aspect.

That we're not always good and kind. You just test this out for a moment. I mean, suppose you're at a dinner party and it's a buffet. And there is the most delicious dessert.

And you've all had, and the host says, there is some of this dessert left if you would like it. Do you? Rush to the thing before anybody else.

Take it on your plate and devour it. Do you deploy more subtle tactics like saying, you saw the family dog lick it before? Or do you wait and see if anybody else takes it?

[5 : 05] Or you're walking down a high street in Clevedon and you find a £10 note line on the pavement. Do you A, pocket it. B, pretend you didn't see it.

C, take it to a police station. Or D, decide that you will pick it up. But your justification for picking up and taking it is, you will give it to a good cause, which you might get round to.

You see, just by dipping a thermometer into our everyday lives, that there are times when goodness and kindness are a challenge for us.

Definitely. And yet, says Julie, in the midst of the worst conceivable trauma that any human being could imagine, certainly any parent could imagine.

Okay. She says, what's bringing me through this is the myriad of small kindnesses and goodness, shown to me from people I don't even know.

[6 : 09] One of the big collision courses today between Christian belief and the way that modern Britain thinks, hinges around what we call anthropology.

That is, what are we basically like? Are we basically good people? But we've been spoiled either by bad parenting strategies or our genes or all this stuff.

In other words, are we the way we are? We were basically good, but we've been spoiled by all that stuff. Or are we basically not so good? Because our tendency is to be self-centered and selfish.

And historic Christianity has taken the latter view, that we need to be healed. Remember in Isaiah, when Isaiah, speaking hundreds of years before it happened, speaks of the finished work of Jesus in these terms.

He says, by his wounds you have been healed. Or you could go to Ezekiel chapter 18, where there's a bunch of people wandering around. At this point, the Jews are in exile in Babylon.

[7 : 25] And the Jews are going around saying, it's a rather cryptic phrase, to be honest. They say, the fathers have eaten sour grapes and set the children's teeth on it. You're thinking, what does that mean?

What it means is, this is not our fault. It's the fault of our forefathers. We're here in exile because of their behavior, not because of ours. And you would think that God might have some sympathy for that.

But no, God says to them, this proverb shall surely never be used again in Israel. For the soul that sins will surely die.

What are we like? Well, I wish I had long enough to say some more about that. But nobody, I think we can say, kindness and goodness.

Nobody is going to disagree. Well, maybe Hannibal Lecter or Stalin or somebody. But none of us would disagree that kindness and goodness, exercised through humans, would make a better society.

[8 : 28] Come back to that. The Bible holds up two realities for us. Firstly, God is goodness personified. And God is kind. He is grace personified.

And when I say personified, what I mean is, He is literally personified in the person of Jesus. God personifies Himself in Jesus.

If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus as the Bible reveals Him to us. If, as a disciple, making no assumptions, but if you're a disciple, healthily you will want to live as Jesus lived.

And somewhere in all of that, goodness and kindness will play a big part. And so we come to our reading today. I would imagine there's some of you sitting there who have been around churches for any length of time who could almost recite that parable by rote.

It is one of the best known ones as beloved by, you know, you've got, I've done, I don't know how many church weekends, hundreds of church weekends. And, you know, they send the kids away.

[9 : 36] And then at the end, the kids will come back and explain their pro. Nearly all kids go for the Good Samaritan and reenact it. You know, it might be mods and rockers or something even more contemporary than that.

Now, it has a grip on us as a story. But I need to say to you, although it's probably one of the best known stories in the New Testament, parables in the New Testament, it is probably one of the most misunderstood.

You remember the scenario here is a young lawyer comes to Jesus and says, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

And Jesus quotes directly to him from the Shemach in the Jewish law in Deuteronomy chapter 6. You can read it there. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

And then Jesus adds, it's not in the original. Jesus says, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Interestingly, the church has taken a different view of what that means throughout the centuries.

[10:51] For years and years and years, the church thought that Jesus was being ironic and saying, if you loved other people as much as you love yourself, the world would be a different place.

But 20th century psychology, of course, has put a different twist on that. And so it's interpreted now that you really need to love yourself to behave like this.

And of course, there's some truth in both of those strands. But interestingly, I mean, what a great question. You know, I've been in ministry for 40 years.

I wish it was so simple that people would wander up to me and say, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And honestly, nobody ever has. But this guy does.

Jesus gives him the classic Jewish answer from the law, and then just puts that little twist. I'd love your neighbor as you love yourself. And then the lawyer, and this could be another sermon in itself.

[11:55] The lawyer says, he wishing to justify himself. Let me tell you, I bet I'm standing in front of a room full of experts, of people who are very good at justifying themselves.

That's another sermon. But then he says, so who is my neighbor? And Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. But in so many people's minds, the Good Samaritan is told in answer to the question, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

No. It's in response to the question, who is my neighbor? And so I want to say to you this morning, five things.

I want you to think about these things, because you will not, unless you get this, you will unlikely get any consistency in your life around being good and kind. The first thing about this story is the very obvious point, which I've just alluded to, and that is, just being good and kind will not save you in itself.

The Bible's very, very clear on this, though apparently lots of people who go to Church of England churches are not so clear. There is this confused idea that you can describe somebody's behavior as Christian, irrespective of whether they know Jesus Christ or not.

[13:28] In other words, too often we reduce Christianity to just a set of ethical principles, which in modern Britain are now regarded as wildly out of date, as a matter of fact. But was Jesus summing up the law?

Yes, he was. Or was he saying something that is basically intrinsic to the gospel? No, he wasn't. Why is that? Because, as St. Paul makes clear, we are saved by works, not by works.

In Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, 8 to 10, there's something really exciting. Paul says, trust God, and there are good works that God has prepared in advance for you.

And, you know, I don't think, I mean, unless, I mean, you might be deeply spiritual, and God writes his kind of game plan for the day on your bedroom wall every morning.

It doesn't happen to me. You know, I have to work it out day by day. Do you pray for opportunities to show the love of God to others? Because I can promise you, if you pray that prayer, it will be a prayer that God will clearly answer.

[14:45] Some of those good works, God will make very clear to you. Though, again, you know, I can only speak for myself here. You know, Paul wrote these words.

He said, the good that I want to do, I find myself avoiding. And the evil I want to avoid, I find myself doing. I can be quite good at kind of putting, you know, I think of something.

I think, be really kind to give this person a call today or to drop them a note. And then I don't get around to it. I wonder if I'm the only person in church, looking at me, probably I am, but am I the only person in church who can be so inconsistent with my attempts to do what's fairly obvious to me in terms of goodness and kindness?

But if some acts of goodness and kindness are clear to us, it's equally true that some need, you know, we need to create the opportunity for them.

You know, what do you do if you see somebody who's got a visual impairment trying to cross the road? Do you think to yourself, well, maybe they've done that, you know, before, they'll probably be okay.

[15 : 54] Or do you go and give them a hand? What do you do when you see an elderly person struggling with a heavy bag full of shopping? Here's the point about this story.

Good works in themselves will not serve you, but they are a proof that you trust God in Jesus Christ. Second thing I want you to think about is this.

We tend to be selective about the people we will help. This story is all about that. What this story is implying is that the one person who offered help on paper was the least person likely to give help because there were ethnic issues between the two groups of people.

Jews and Samaritans wouldn't normally even speak to each other. And you say to yourself, you know, how could the priest get it so wrong? How could the Levite get it so wrong?

These are religious people, you know, and the Samaritan gets it right. Very challenging for us, isn't it, that God calls us to even be good and to be kind to the people who we do not naturally like.

[17 : 11] You say, well, I like everybody. No, you don't. There's even some neuroscience that suggests that part of our brains are wired in such a way that part of our identity is formed by not identifying ourselves with others.

And what this story, this parable tells us, it never happened, of course, but what this parable teaches us is we've got to overcome that. And when we see people who are not like us, the call on us to show those works prepared for us in advance is still there as strongly, maybe even more strongly.

In answer to the question, who is my neighbor, Jesus basically says, anyone in need within my sphere of influence. You can't say I'm not going to help him because he's a different ethnic divide. Another ethnic group. No. If somebody is in need and they're within my sphere of influence, God says it's my job to do something about it.

The third thing I want to think about is this. We need to deploy our imagination in the way we apply goodness and kindness to others. One of the things I love about this story is that not only did the Samaritan stop, he took him to an inn, he got him some care, got him bandaged and all that stuff, and then he left some money so that the man could be cared for until he was well enough to move on.

[18 : 51] I know this is a kind of part of my personality, but sometimes I think my attempts at goodness and kindness are very wooden. You know, they're lacking in imagination, and I pray that God would give me the imagination, not just to deal with the situation in front of me, but to think a little further than that.

Fourth thing you need to think about is that if you want to change the world, if you want to make a difference in this world, you need to be prepared to sacrifice. The good Samaritan gave of his time and he gave of his money in order that this person might be cared for.

And the bare minimum commitment to any of us who do acts of goodness and kindness is time, and maybe, maybe it will involve money. Today, you know, there's a lot of critical stuff written about a group of people who are referred to as millennials.

They would be the age of some of our children, many of us. And generally, the rough definition is people who were born after 1984. And, you know, they've been called the Snowflake generation, they've been called the Entitled Generation.

But I do want to speak up a little bit for this generation, because I think that they do have a concern to grow into a world where they will make their difference.

[20 : 23] There is something quite altruistic about that generation, which, as far as I can recall, wasn't quite as clear from my own generation. And, of course, we know that phrases like, change the world and make a difference are very easy to kind of flow from our tongues.

But the bottom line is, and this may be what millennials need to think about a bit more, if you want to change the world or make a difference, you can't do it at a discount.

It's going to cost you. You're going to have to sacrifice something. And the reason why Jesus is such an inspiration to me, in terms of this motherhood and apple pie theme called goodness and kindness, is that as far as I can see, he paid the ultimate sacrifice, in that he gave his life on a cross in Calvary, that people like you and I can have that part of our personality and behavior that we don't like, that we can be forgiven.

And if we're really attentive to that, we can be healed of the desire to do the things that bring us down. So, listen, the Samaritan shows us, not only that this is kind of transcultural, trans-ethnic, trans-gear, whatever, he shows us that if you want to make a difference, then you need to be

prepared to make a sacrifice.

And the last thing is obvious. We need to go do likewise. I mean, this is the kind of message, you could sit through it, form your own opinion of it, and go home and do nothing.

[22 : 08] But I really want to issue you with a challenge. Catherine Ryan Hyde, in her book, *Pay It Forward*, which any of you read Simon Gwilibode's daily notes, will have read on May the 28th.

She wrote a book called *Pay It Forward*, and it tells the story of a 12-year-old boy whose name was Trevor McKinney. And at school, his social studies teacher gave them a project.

And she said, this project, I want you to tell me how you're going to change the world. And so class members went home. And so this guy, Trevor, came back, and he had a plan, and it was a feasible plan.

His plan was to do a good deed for three people. And then at the moment that they said, thank you for the good deed that he had done, he would say to them, I would like you to go and do good deeds to three other people.

So the thing has a kind of multiplier effect and impact. Let me tell you how Simon Gwilibode, I never pronounce his name right, but how this man, he says, he invasions a revolution of goodness and kindness spreading beyond his town in California.

[23 : 33] A film was made of the book, and the practice of doing random acts of kindness brought joy and hope to people across the world. Simon Gwilibode's summary headline is, *Good Deeds Spread Good Seeds*.

So I wonder which ones of you, don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to put your hand up, but which of the people gathered in church this morning are going to take this challenge up? Are there people here who could bake a cake?

I mean, you wouldn't want a cake, I'd bake, trust me, but other people in here could write a note, make a call, give some money away, mow a lawn, help an elderly or disabled person across the road, clean a car, babysit for a single parent, give them a bit of independence.

I mean, that's my unimaginative list of the kind of things that we could commit to. And the thing is, what the story of the Good Samaritan says is that a lot of you spend a huge amount of time supporting your family.

Jesus said, you know, there's not much credit to you, is it, if you only love the people who love you. So part of the challenge of this is we've got to think beyond that when we think about goodness and kindness.

[24 : 58] Galatians 6 tells us to do good to everyone, but to start in the church. Friends, if we don't do this in the church, then the church becomes less of a community and just a kind of people group that meets together once a week and people bounce off each other like billiard balls.

So, five things there for you to think about. One, good works won't save you. Two, don't be selective about the people you will help. Three, deploy your imagination in your efforts to be good and kind. Four, if you want to change the world, it's going to cost you. You need to be prepared to sacrifice. And five, we need to go and do likewise. Listen, Bible, it's interesting, isn't it, how we spend times in our PCCs and, you know, church groups talking about how we get people to come.

Have you noticed in the New Testament, Jesus talks a lot more about sending people, telling people to go out there in the world and walk or talk. I don't know a pastor who doesn't want more people in his church or her church, let me be honest about that, but what I do know is we need to reverse the flow on this.

And instead of just being focused on getting people to come, we need to go. So, five things to think about as disciples of Jesus and three good deeds to do.

[26 : 29] Finally, and very briefly, when I was a curate in Slough, we had all kinds of people in dire need. And my secretary was married to a man who basically lay in bed all day long.

He did get a job eventually, but eventually got sacked from that. And their debt was just rising and rising and rising and rising. And you can imagine, you know, I've never had to do it, thank God, but living with debt would be an amazing burden for me.

And I think it would be for most people too. And so, you know, they almost kind of stopped looking at the mountain of debt they're creating. Stupid bank and credit card companies were happy to keep signing off on their spending.

Not that they were profligate, it was just basic stuff. To the point, and it, you know, in the general economy of things, you know, it doesn't sound that much, I'm going back 30 odd years now.

They owned 4,500 pounds on credit cards. Alan got rehired by the company that, but he didn't earn enough money for them to start making real inroads into the debt that they owed.

[27 : 53] And then I discovered that one lovely single woman in our little congregation had given the whole of her life savings to this family to wipe out the debt.

My first thought was, you idiot. You know, have we put a, have we put a, a stopper in the bottom of the bath or, you know, you just throw him bad money after bad money.

That's what she said to me. She said, Mike, when God judges me, I would rather accuse, be accused of being stupid than I would be accused of being mean.

I've done this. I'm happy to have done this. So let it go. I read a book once by a man called Gonville French Beater.

What a name, eh? He was a rather lacy priest from the city of London. I never met him once and I could tell at 11 o'clock in the morning that gin and tonic was his tippie.

[29 : 12] But in this book, he wrote something deeply shocking. I'm going to close with this because it shocked me when I read it. This is what he said. He said, I wish that Christians would wear a bedpan around their necks rather than a cross.

He said, because a bedpan would remind them that love demands menial and undramatic acts of service rather than a symbol, the cross, which we sentimentalized and use as a piece of jewelry.

If you're wearing a cross around your neck now, don't feel bad. But remember that quote that actually love demands menial and undramatic acts of love, of goodness, sorry, and kindness.

And friends, we can do this. We really can do this and start to make small inroads to make this world a bigger and better place for all human beings to flourish in.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.