

Pope Urges Giving Up Meanness for Lent; Baptist Pastor Agrees, and There's Room for the Rest of Us

The Wired Word for the Week of March 8, 2020

In the News

Speaking to thousands of people in St. Peter's Square for his general address on Ash Wednesday about things to give up for Lent and beyond, Pope Francis urged his hearers to quit insulting people on social media.

While the pope's primary audience is Roman Catholics, his words in this address apply broadly to all who seek to follow Jesus. In fact, a similar message appeared in the February 20 blog entry from Gary Thomas, a teaching pastor at Second Baptist Church Houston. The entry was titled, "Why Are Christians So Mean?"

Lent, the pope said in his remarks, "is a time to give up useless words, gossip, rumors, tittle-tattle, and speak to God on a first name basis," he said. "We live in an atmosphere polluted by too much verbal violence, too many offensive and harmful words, which are amplified by the Internet," he said. "Today, people insult each other as if they were saying 'Good Day.'"

"We have become used to hearing everything about everyone, and we risk slipping into a worldliness that atrophies our hearts," the pontiff said.

In his blog, Thomas quoted Christian writer Dallas Willard, who said that Christians are mean in proportion to when they value being "right" over being "like Christ."

Thomas supported his remarks by quoting from Romans, which, he said, "sets up a high standard for believers, telling us to 'be devoted to one another in brotherly love' (12:10), 'never be wise in your own sight' (12:16) and keep in mind that 'love does no harm to its neighbor' (13:10)."

"*No harm. To anyone,*" Thomas added for emphasis.

This means, said Thomas, that "in our relations with anyone we are to be devoted to their overall welfare, to not be overly confident in our opinion, and to never do anyone any harm. There's no room here for any 'Bible-believing' Christian to be mean."

"What a different world this would be if, indeed, we were 'devoted' to everyone's welfare," Thomas added, "if we were humble in our own opinions, and committed to not do anyone harm - no gossip, no mean-spirited denunciation, no slander."

Pope Francis, referring to Jesus' 40 days of fasting and meditating in the desert, also said, that during Lent, Jesus is "calling us into the desert," and that Jesus "invites us to listen to what matters. To the devil who tempted him, he replied: 'Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God,'" Francis said.

"... more than bread we need the Word of God," the pope said, "we need to speak with God; we need to pray."

Not all Christian denominations observe Lent per se, but all of them tell us we need the Word of God and that we need to pray.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Pope Francis Asks Followers to Give Up Trolling for Lent. *The Verge*
Pope Francis' Lent Advice: Put Down Phone, Pick Up Bible. *CNA*
Why Are Christians So Mean? *Gary Thomas*

Applying the News Story

The difficulty with kindness is that it needs to be practiced on a person-to-person level rather than as something we direct toward God. Thus, being kind can feel too mundane to be a *spiritual* discipline.

But kindness toward others is indeed a spiritual practice and thus, is the topic of this lesson about growing in the Spirit.

The Big Questions

1. What elements of your speech, social media comments and other interactions put you, as Pope Francis said, at "risk of slipping into a worldliness that atrophies our hearts"?
2. When have you spoken or behaved in a way that might be defined as "mean"? How, if at all, do you justify such speech or behavior?
3. Is doing no harm to anyone a Christian principle? Why or why not?
4. Is it true that "Christians are mean in proportion to when they value being 'right' over being 'like Christ'"? How important is it to you to be "right"? How important is it to you to be "like Christ"? What do you do when those two things are in conflict?
5. Whether or not your denomination observes Lent, in what ways does your church call you to a life of holiness?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 11:17

Those who are kind reward themselves, but the cruel do themselves harm. (No context needed.)

Perhaps your experience of life suggests that this proverb has things backward, and that it should read, "Those who are kind reward others, but the cruel benefit themselves." But no. It means what it says.

Questions: In what ways is this proverb as stated in the Bible correct? What divine principles are behind it?

Micah 6:8

[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (For context, read 6:6-8.)

In the context verses, the prophet Micah asks rhetorically on behalf of his whole audience whether coming before God with multiple burnt offerings or even the offering of one's firstborn child is sufficient to please God and redeem one from one's transgressions. Then, answering his own question, the prophet speaks the words quoted above, which we assume he'd heard from God.

Note that the prophet names only three requirements, and one of them is *kindness*.

Questions: Why do you think God wants these three things from us: justice, kindness and walking humbly with God? How do the three interact? What does *God* get out of our doing these three things? What do you get out of doing them?

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (For context, read 13:1-13.)

Paul wrote his now famous "love chapter" as part of his correction of members of the Corinthian church who were arguing about the value of their spiritual gifts over those of others. His message is that love trumps all other gifts and ought to govern how the members treat one another.

Questions: Do you ever feel that Bible verses such as these stand in judgment of you? If so, what would be a good way to respond? What sort of behavior and conversation do these verses call us toward when we are in a disagreement with other Christians over matters of doctrine or scripture?

Colossians 3:12-17

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive./

14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (For context, read 3:1-17.)

This is direction from the apostle Paul to the believers at Colossae regarding how their new life in Christ should evidence itself in their lives.

Questions: We've left the verse numbers in place intentionally. Which verse or verses above speak most directly to you? Why? What if any changes should you make in your life to do as that verse or those verses direct? How determined, if at all, are you to make those changes, and when will you begin?