

# THE SOUND OF MUFFLED WINGS

## Louder Than Words (Part 5) | Kindness | Hebrews 13:1-8 (TLB)

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### Be Kind to Strangers

If I had to identify just one attribute of character that I most associate with my mother the word would be: KINDNESS. In fact, one Mother's Day when I was a teenager, I gave my mom and handmade card inside of which I'd penned in crayon a poem I composed for her on just this theme. It read: "And though I've lived for many a year, oft' acting like a swine... I still regard thee, Mother Dear, as loving, sweet and KIND!" Mom HAD to be kind to put up with me!

Kindness is one of those attributes of Christian character that every family, workplace, church and community would benefit from having in greater supply, don't you agree. Think how much would change for the better in our nation today if the Kindness Dial got turned way up.

When the writer to the Hebrews said: "**Do not forget to be kind to strangers,**" I believe he was addressing one of the most pervasive problems of human life. After all, there would be no need to remind anyone of the importance of giving special treatment to strangers were the response that such people usually elicit in us not so often far from "kind" at all.

Think about the "strangers" in your world. I'm not referring here to the immigrant crowds flooding our country or the faceless masses who walk by you on the street or in the shopping center. Politics aside, there are implications in this text from Hebrews for Bible-obeying Christians in our response to many kinds of strangers. But this morning, I want to focus our thinking on how we respond to people whose lives may already touch ours, but in encounters that leave us no closer than before.

Take, for example, the person you see quite a bit at work or school whose personal attitude really gets on your nerves; or the people you occasionally pass by at the office or club, whose focus on their own business is so faithful and unobtrusive that you hardly notice them anymore; or the person you talk to briefly at a social gathering or in the church hall, whose cheery charm seems to invite you just so far into his or her life, but no further. These are the real "strangers" around us -- the people whose surfaces we may know well, and yet whose inner self and story we may hardly know at all.

### Look Beneath the Surface

The Bible tells us that God understands the reason that makes people become and remain little more than "strangers" to those around. When Jesus stood up in the Nazareth synagogue and spoke of freeing the captives, enlightening the blind, and releasing the oppressed, he was talking about something far more ambitious than a social justice or medical assistance campaign.

As only one who can see through to the heart of people, Jesus saw the fear at the center of human behavior. He saw the fear of failure that keeps people from attempting great and risky endeavors, and causes them to become wrapped up instead in the trivial pursuits which define so much of contemporary life. Jesus saw the fear of not having one's needs met that leads people to try to hoard possessions and protect their own interests above others. He saw the naked fear of being known in all one's imperfection that leads people to push others away with arrogance, humor, or shallow words. With the eyes of the Creator, Jesus sees the trembling soul at the center of every one of us and longs to help us live beyond the fears that bind us.

Perhaps some of you are familiar with a story I once heard that illustrates this point more poetically. The story is told of an odd old man who was seen staggering through the streets of Florence, Italy one day, dragging by a harness a great, rough-hewn slab of rock. Passers-by gaped and laughed at the folly of this old crank, till one of them finally barred his way, and demanded to know what in the world had seized him to prize this big, ugly stone. With a tired sigh, the old man straightened his back, mopped his brow with his hand, turned to gaze at the boulder, and then with a look in the eye so keen and penetrating that it sent chills down the back of his inquisitor, the old man replied: "Because, my friend, there is an **angel** in that stone." And thus, as the legend has it, was the beginning of Michelangelo's masterpiece, the "David," widely viewed as one of the most magnificent images of human potential ever sculpted.

### **Choose Mercy More Than Judgment**

Now, here is a thought for all of us to ponder: Jesus gazes with the same keen and penetrating eyes at the strangers you and I find it so hard to regard with more than a passing interest. He realizes that they are unfinished creations. He knows that they need help if they are to break free of the sin and fear that keeps so many of us trapped inside the sort of stony prisons Michelangelo sculpted here.

The fruit of the Spirit we call "kindness" isn't some sentimental feeling of goodwill. Kindness is the deliberate choice we make to see people not as finished products needing our critical judgment but as people needing our merciful help to reach their God-given potential. Kindness is the way my mom treated me as a teenager, though I'd lived for many a year off' acting like a swine! In fact, the German speakers amongst us can tell us that the word kindness actually has the same root as the word for children -- "kinder." It's the word from which we get "kindergarten" -- the place where children are treated like garden plants needing devoted care in order to grow up. To be filled with the kindness we see supremely in Jesus, means to view people as kids who need our help to become the kind of creation God long for them to be.

Perhaps this vision for not only what people are -- but also for what they could be by God's power -- was what the writer of Hebrews was getting at when he cautioned us to consider the possibility that we might be in the company of "angels" without knowing it. British theologian, C.S. Lewis, famously described that truth in these words many of us have heard but perhaps not fully implemented. In his essay, THE WEIGHT OF GLORY, Lewis writes: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.

Nations, cultures, arts, civilization -- these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit -- [people on the way to becoming] immortal horrors or everlasting splendors... It is a serious thing to live in a society of [eternal beings], to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or another of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics... "Our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner...[for] next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses."

### **Act As If It's Not Too Late**

When Jesus burst out of the stone prison in which he'd been entombed and appeared to his followers on Easter Sunday, he gave them a mission. The marching orders were simple: **As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you (John 20:21)**. If Jesus were here this morning -- and he is -- I imagine he might say something similar to you and me: "My Disciple, I know there are people out there who are mere strangers to you. But I see everything about their character and condition. Let me tell you, no matter how well or poorly put together they seem... whether they seem to be swine... they are all angels in stone. To greater and lesser extents, they are more like frightened children than is visible. Each of them is bound for misery or for glory and what you show them of my love can make all the difference."

In his book, WHO SWITCHED THE PRICE TAGS, American sociologist, Tony Campolo, tells the story of a fifth-grade teacher named Miss Thompson came to know that truth. If nothing else I've said this morning has made much sense or sticks with you, then perhaps her story will. You see, like many of us, Miss Thompson found it hard to LOVE all of God's children the same. Teddy Stallard was a boy that Miss Thompson found it difficult to even LIKE -- and for good reason. Teddy didn't seem all that interested in school. His eyes had that glassy, unfocused gaze that discourages teachers. His hair was unkempt. His clothes smelled musty. And when he answered Miss Thompson's questions, it was always in monosyllables.

There was little to like about Teddy, and so whenever Miss Thompson marked Teddy's papers, she got a strange satisfaction out of putting X's next to his wrong answers and red F's at the top of his papers. Perhaps Miss Thompson should have known better; she had access to Teddy's records, and they offered insight into the boy for those with the eyes to see. The records read as follows -- "1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but has poor home situation. 2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home. 3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year. 4th Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well-behaved. His [family] shows little interest."

Christmas came and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's fifth grade class brought her Christmas presents. They piled their presents high on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Much to Miss Thompson's surprise, there was one there from Teddy Stallard. It was characteristically ugly -- wrapped in brown paper, held together with scotch tape, with a message on it that simply read: "For Miss Thompson from Teddy."

When she opened Teddy's gift, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half of the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume. The other boys and girls began to giggle over Teddy's gifts, but Miss Thompson had at least enough grace to silence them by immediately putting on the bracelet and some of the perfume on her wrist. Holding her wrist up for the others, she said: "Doesn't it smell lovely?" And the children, taking their cue from the teacher, readily agreed with "ooh's" and "ahh's."

At the end of the day, when school was over and the other children gone, Teddy Stallard lingered behind. Slowly, he came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson... Miss Thompson... You smell just like my mother... and her bracelet looks real pretty on you too. I'm glad you like my presents." When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees behind her desk and begged God to forgive her for being so blind... so unkind.

The next day, the children in Room 401 were greeted by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person, committed to loving her kids with kindness unknown before -- especially the strange ones; especially Teddy Stallard. By the end of that school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He had caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

The years went by and Miss Thompson lost touch with the fifth graders of that class, until one day she found a note in her mailbox. It simply read: "Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my high school class. Love, Teddy Stallard." Four years later, another note came: "Dear Miss Thompson: They just told me I will be graduating first in my college class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I've loved it." And, four years later again: "Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I thought you should be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact, and I was wondering if you'd come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now. Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard."

Tony Campolo says that Miss Thompson went to that wedding, and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat. Personally, I think she belonged there; for beneath the stony surface of a strange life she'd found it hard to love, she'd heard the sound of muffled wings and, with strokes of kindness, helped to set an angel free.

Now our Savior asks: "Will you?"

Let us pray...

O God who sees in us and others, muffled souls longing to fly free, use our humble lives we pray, to reach out in kindness to sisters and brothers whom others mistake for worthless strangers. Enable us to be the agents of your life-liberating Love that is the same yesterday, today, and forevermore. Amen.

**Hebrews 13:1** Continue to love each other with true brotherly love. **2** Don't forget to be kind to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it! **3** Don't forget about those in jail. Suffer with them as though you were there yourself. Share the sorrow of those being mistreated, for you know what they are going through.

**4** Honor your marriage and its vows, and be pure; for God will surely punish all those who are immoral or commit adultery.

**5** Stay away from the love of money; be satisfied with what you have. For God has said, "I will never, never fail you nor forsake you." **6** That is why we can say without any doubt or fear, "The Lord is my Helper, and I am not afraid of anything that mere man can do to me."

**7** Remember your leaders who have taught you the Word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and try to trust the Lord as they do.

**8** Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.