

6



# KINDNESS

LIFE ON THE VINE

## PREPARE

Read all the assigned Scriptures listed on page 3 of the participant guide. Give attention to Kenneson’s critique of the “random acts of kindness” idea when you read Chapter 6 in his book.

Read the introductions to the books of Micah and Hosea to get a sense of the contexts for understanding Micah 6:8 and Hosea 11:1-4. Note that Kenneson points out the Hebrew word hesed, translated as “steadfast love,” “lovingkindness,” or “mercy” elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, is translated as “kindness.”

When reading 1 Samuel 20 and 2 Samuel 9, it may be helpful to scan the intervening Scriptures, particularly the column headings in your Bible, to have in mind the context for the stories of Jonathan, David, and Mephibosheth



Invite a group member to supply the fruit to share during the meeting time. This week’s suggestion is banana slices.

*Set up the room: Have the items ready for the welcome table as well as Bibles and copies of the learner guide for group members. Write on a chalkboard or whiteboard, in large letters, PRACTICE RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS. If the room has no board, use a large sheet of paper or a large poster board.*

## PRAY

As part of your discipline of preparation this week, pray Psalm 145.

## GATHERING AT THE TABLE

### *In Advance*

Prepare the welcome table by arranging the bowl(s) or tray(s) of fruit brought in to share. Open the Bible to Galatians 5 and place the white pillar candle or taper nearby. Be sure to have matches or a lighter handy for the person designated to light the candle.

### *As People Arrive*

Greet everyone. Introduce newcomers and visitors to other class members. Keep in mind that bearing the fruit of the Spirit begins the moment the first person walks in the door.

### *To Open*

Just prior to getting started, pass around the fruit so those who've arrived can enjoy it. Reserve a portion of the fruit as a display on the worship table. Once it's time to start, call attention to the worship table. Invite everyone to focus on the fruit on the table as you read aloud Galatians 5:22-23. Light (or have someone else light) the Christ candle on the worship table.

Conclude the gathering time with prayer. Consider using Psalm 145:14-20 as the starting point.

## EXPLORING THE ROOTS OF KINDNESS

Read the excerpt from Kenneson's book printed on page 3 in the participant guide. Hear responses from the group to Kenneson's critique of the idea of "random acts of kindness."

Read aloud this week's focus verse, Micah 6:8. Point out that the word translated as kindness is the Hebrew word *hesed* [*pronounced che-sáid; the initial h sound is like the ch in Bach*]. Recall that the word *hesed* can be translated as "love" or "lovingkindness" and emphasizes especially the covenant, or steadfast love of God. Kenneson says that in Scripture, God's kindness and God's *hesed* or steadfast love are often treated as synonymous (p. 136).

- ◆ What does Kenneson's remark say about how we are to understand the nature of kindness as a fruit of God's Spirit?
- ◆ How does what the Micah verse imply about kindness compare to what is meant by the phrase "random acts of kindness"?

# EXAMINING THE FRUIT OF KINDNESS

## *Character of the Fruit*

Have someone read 1 Samuel 20 and 2 Samuel 9. In between the reading of the two chapters, summarize or highlight what takes place in the course of the intervening chapters—direct group members to scan the column headings in their Bibles. Also see the first paragraph on page 135 in *Life On the Vine*. Call attention to the notion that both David's friendship with Jonathan and David's later care for Jonathan's son, are portrayed here as expressions of what David himself calls "the kindness of God."

- ◆ What characterizes the kindness or "lovingkindness" shared by David and Jonathan?
- ◆ What motivates David's act of kindness toward Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth?
- ◆ What does David mean by describing his care for Mephibosheth as "the kindness of God"?

\* If time allows, hear Hosea 11:1-4 read. Talk about what God has in mind in using the word kindness to describe God's relationship to the Israelites.

- ◆ According to Hosea, what is it that God does on behalf of God's people that constitutes kindness?

## *Obstacles to Bearing the Fruit*

Call attention to Kenneson's definition of kindness:

*"Kindness is a particular manifestation of love's other-directedness . . . kindness, at its most basic level, involves the giving and receiving of help."* pages 136-137:

Keeping that definition in mind, form two groups to talk about how culture's promotion of (1) **self-sufficiency** and (2) **personal autonomy** inhibits the cultivation of kindness defined in that way. Have the two groups use the comments and questions below to guide discussion. Consider reproducing the two discussion sections below on a separate piece of paper for use by the two groups.

## *GROUP 1: Self-sufficiency*

Instruction: recall an occasion in which you received someone's unexpected gift, or offer of hospitality, or act or kindness.

- ◆ How do you feel when someone offers to help you?
- ◆ How do you feel when you offer to help someone else?
- ◆ When has a sense of indebtedness or obligation to another person made you question, resent, or avoid giving or receiving help?

Consider this contradiction in our culture: our day-to-day existence increasingly depends on services rendered by others, yet we are encouraged to be independent and self-sufficient.

- ◆ How do we cultivate kindness as part of our daily lives in the midst of striving to be self-sufficient?
- ◆ How do we learn to receive the kindness of others without viewing the need for help as a sign of weakness or inadequacy?

## *GROUP 2: Autonomy*

Instruction: Kenneson suggests that our culture encourages us to “evaluate our present well-being almost exclusively in terms of our own contributions” (p. 144). With that in mind hear Ephesians 4:25-32 read aloud and discuss these questions:

- ◆ What does Paul mean by saying “we are members of one another”?
- ◆ How do you respond to Kenneson's counter-claim that “most of us regard ourselves as autonomous individuals and as members of one another only in some derived sense”?

Consider this contradiction in our culture: our day-to-day existence increasingly depends on services rendered by others, yet we are encouraged to be independent and self-sufficient.

- ◆ How do we cultivate kindness as part of our daily lives in the midst of striving to be self-sufficient?
- ◆ How do we learn to receive the kindness of others without viewing the need for help as a sign of weakness or inadequacy?

# BEARING THE FRUIT OF KINDNESS IN THE WORLD

The Scriptural image of the body of Christ is perhaps most able to counter the illusion of self-sufficiency and to nurture the mutual practice of kindness as a way of life. In support of that image, Kenneson suggests three ways to cultivate the fruit of kindness as the body of Christ:

- (1) remembering our shared story,
- (2) nurturing our connections to each other, and
- (3) listening to one another.

Have the group consider those suggestions in this manner:

Invite group members to reflect on their life's story, imagining how to narrate that story without reference to other people. Allow a couple of minutes for everyone to do this silently (some may have done this exercise during the week). Talk about what this kind of mental exercise says about our alleged self-sufficiency and autonomy. Then discuss this question:

- ◆ How can our experience of worship together help remind us of the larger story in which our story fits, the story of God's "grace in kindness toward us in Jesus Christ" (Eph. 2:7)?

Discuss the usefulness of the New Testament's metaphor of the body of Christ.

- ◆ How does this image illuminate or shape your experience as a Christian?
- ◆ How might this image foster the practice of kindness toward others—even those who may not be professed members of the body of Christ?



Close your time together by going to the chalkboard or whiteboard where you have written the statement PRACTICE RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS; erase the words RANDOM ACTS OF. Then write beneath the word, kindness, this statement by Martin Luther:

*"I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me."*

Then form a circle and pray, beginning with Ephesians 2:4-7:

*But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of grace in kindness toward us in Jesus Christ.*