

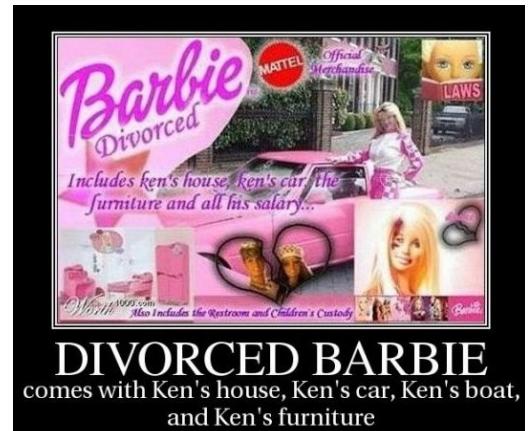
**START WITH A STORY:** A man was driving home one evening and realized that it was his daughter's birthday and he hadn't bought her a present. He drove to the mall and ran to the toy store and he asked the store manager "How much is that new Barbie in the window?"

The Manager replied, "Which one? We have:

- 'Barbie goes to the gym' for \$19.95 ...
- 'Barbie goes to the Ball' for \$19.95 ...
- 'Barbie goes shopping for \$19.95 ...
- 'Barbie goes to the beach' for \$19.95...
- 'Barbie goes to the Nightclub' for \$19.95 ...
- and 'Divorced Barbie' for \$375.00."

"Why is the Divorced Barbie \$375.00, when all the others are \$19.95?" Dad asked surprised.

"Divorced Barbie comes with Ken's car, Ken's House, Ken's boat, Ken's dog, Ken's cat and Ken's furniture."



## SCRIPTURE:

**LESSON THEME:** The Spirit of Niceness



**POINT OF CONTACT:** Red riding hood is going to take her grandmother some vegan tasties and a bottle of mineral water. The woodsman (who saves *Little Red Riding Hood* and her grandmother in the most well-known versions of the tale) ends up beheaded by the grandmother, who leaps from the wolf's mouth of her own accord after a "stirring" moralizing speech from Red, who states that women and wolves can solve their own problems without a man's interference. This comes after of course Red Riding Hood

has labeled him as "sexist" and "speciesist" for deciding to try to save Red Riding Hood by killing the wolf. The wolf, Red Riding Hood, and her grandmother then form an "alternative household" together.

**INTRODUCTION:** Franky Schaeffer put it this way: "The clear, loud call for accommodation comes wrapped in the name of the Gospel of Niceness. Sin as the source of all human problems is banished and a call for repentance is rarely made" (Schaeffer, *Bad News for Modern Man*, p. 45).

**LESSON:** Evangelicalism today is consumed with relationalism, the fine art of getting along with people. Bruce Larson, a leading New Evangelical author himself, advises us that "the quality and scope of relationships and the ability and willingness to relate are marks of orthodoxy rather than doctrine" (Larson, *The Relational Revolution*, p. 32). In other words, **the emphasis in theology becomes relational and not conceptual**. This tendency, by the way, accounts for a major shift in expectations of the average church member toward the ministry of the pastor. **Many want the pastor to center his preaching around "how to" themes rather than doctrinal themes.**



Talk show host(ess) Ellen DeGeneres has captured a market share of daytime television viewers. She is an avowed lesbian and her show would be considered naughty niceness. She has authored three books, and started her own record company, 'ElevenEleven.' She has won (13) Emmys, (14) People's Choice Awards, and numerous other awards for her work and charitable efforts.

**1. THE ATTITUDE OF EVANGELICALS TODAY IS, "LET'S NOT OFFEND ANYONE"** - Let's preach the gospel in such a way as to be well-thought-of by the unsaved world. "To begin with, most Evangelicals tacitly recognize that Protestant hegemony (*domination*) in America has given way to a potpourri of religious belief systems that itself is girded by a strong liberal code of religious tolerance. In response, Evangelicalism has adopted A SOCIAL POSTURE THAT PLEADS, 'DON'T TAKE OFFENSE, BUT HERE IS THE TRUTH.' IT IS A DEMEANOR OF PROPRIETY, GENTILITY, AND SOCIABILITY" (*James Hunter, American Evangelicalism*, p. 91).



*America's niceness evangelist televangelist, author, and the Senior Pastor of Lakewood Church, the largest Protestant church in the United States, in Houston, Texas. Joel Osteen's ministry is seen by over 7 million broadcast media viewers weekly and over 20 million monthly in over 100 nations around the world. Osteen has written five New York Times Bestselling books. He has been widely nicknamed "The Smiling Preacher".*

**2. THIS SPIRIT OF GENTILITY, OF "NICENESS," PERMEATES EVANGELICALISM** - It affects the approach which evangelicals take toward the presentation of the gospel and their general attitude toward basic doctrines of Scripture. "The civilizing process entails a de-emphasis of Evangelicalism's more offensive aspects: the notions of inherent evil, sinful conduct and lifestyles, the wrath of a righteous and jealous God, and eternal agony and death in hell" (*Hunter, American Evangelicalism*, p. 88). The popular pastor, Chuck Swindoll, says, "When there is a grace-awakening ministry there is an absence of dogmatism and Bible-bashing. ... There is a spirit of openness" (*Swindoll, The Grace Awakening*, pp. 227-28).



One of the original founders of the New Evangelicalism, Carl Henry, is not impressed with the "progress" which has been made. He is alarmed by certain trends and speaks out against them.

In contrast to inclusive modernism, evangelical spokesmen have hesitated to declare all non-biblical religions false. They have spoken rather in terms of the 'superiority' of evangelical teaching. In short, in admiration to the growing mood of tolerance and for the sake of civility in dialogue, the Christian belief was packaged for greater marketability. References to eternal damnation and to hell as the final destiny of the unrepentant wicked were evaded, abridged, or introduced semi-apologetically. The term 'heresy' vanished from inter-religious dialogue" (*Carl Henry, "YFC's 'Cheer for Jesus' No Substitute for the Apostolic Creed," World, March 11, 1989*, p. 7).

**3. WHAT SAITH THE SCRIPTURES?** - Our Lord did not seem to concern Himself with the gospel of niceness when He thundered, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites" (**Matthew 23:14**). The Apostle Paul was not being very nice when he accused his fellow Jews with the crucifixion of Jesus and declared that 'wrath is come upon them to the uttermost' (**1 Thessalonians 2:14-16**). No thought of 'helpful dialogue' seemed to be in the apostle's mind when he definitely accused those who preached a false gospel as those who would be "accursed" (**Galatians 1:9**). I guess to put it very plainly; the method of presenting biblical truth as demonstrated by the apostles, the founders of the church, does not square with the "new look" in evangelicalism. **EARLY CHRISTIANS DID NOT SPECIALIZE IN MAKING EVERYONE FEEL COMFORTABLE. THEY SPOKE THE TRUTH IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT, WITH LOVE BUT ALSO WITH CLARITY AND FORCEFULNESS. THEY PULLED NO PUNCHES.**



**4. NICENESS VS. CHRISTIAN VIRTUE** - Our word 'virtue' is derived from Latin words for strength. The Christian virtues were said to be graces wrought by the Spirit. In medieval theology (*and Romanist today*), the Christian life was said to be a pilgrimage in which the Christian accumulates virtues by grace and cooperation with grace. The Christian life is a journey. Sanctification is progressive. It is the dying of the old man and the making alive of the new. It is growing gradually into conformity into the image of Christ.

Arguably the highest virtue of our time is the virtue of niceness. The essence of niceness is getting along, being agreeable, being thought by others to be a good fellow. As Justice Potter Stewart on obscenity, we know niceness when we see it. If we compare niceness with the traditional virtues, however, we get a clearer picture. Niceness isn't trust, faithfulness, love, hope, good judgment, temperance or any of the other virtues. It is something else. If it isn't these virtues, which we say we value, why is it so powerful? Why is it so often confused with Christian virtue? What if niceness is powerful because it is essential to success in our culture? In recent years we've heard a great deal about "idols of the heart." They certainly exist and the human heart is certainly an idol factory but we haven't heard much about the temptation to of going along to get along.

Think of it this way. Ask yourself whether the great figures of the Bible would pass the "niceness" test in our culture? The Lord closed the ark door (and presumably Noah agreed). Abraham carried Isaac up the mount. Moses killed a man. David was a man of blood. The prophets were hated and killed. The Apostle Paul spoke up to Peter and was the subject of persistent criticism both outside and inside the church. Where there is smoke, there is fire. Right? Were any of them nice by our standards? Yet, these are the figures held up as models of faith and godliness in Scripture. Our Lord himself would hardly pass the niceness test, after all, he threw the money changers out of the temple. He called the Pharisees names. Was he nice? "*Esau have I hated.*" Is that nice?

In sanctification the Holy Spirit is creating fruit in us and He is producing in us virtues... but niceness isn't one of them. That niceness is so powerful among us and the virtues are so remote from our thinking says something about us.

**5. NICE VS KIND - Niceness is not a virtue nor a fruit of the Spirit**, but we treat it like it is in our current cultural climate. Not that this is something new. Today we call the virtue of nicety tolerance.

Traditional tolerance is a virtue in which you are forced to tolerate something, or respond with civility toward something that you do not like or agree with. Somehow this has transformed into a definition of tolerance in which we must agree with, or accept, everything, where nothing is wrong. The former type of tolerance is kind; the latter is nice. Both pseudo-tolerance and niceness, or pseudo-kindness, are less-than, mere shadows of virtue. And that they resemble virtue, but fail to actually be virtue is what makes niceness so dangerous.

We titled this point "Nice vs Kind" because kindness is a virtue, a fruit of the Spirit. As we think through Christianity, then, we need to be discerning about the distinction between nice and kind. Here's where I'd like to kick the question out to you: **What is kindness? And how does it differ from niceness?** Here are some common themes Evangelicals like to toss around when they accuse us of legalism. These principles include the following:

- New Evangelicalism is characterized by a repudiation of separation
- By a love for positivism
- By a rejection of the more negative parts of biblical Christianity
- By a judge-not philosophy
- By a dislike of doctrinal controversy
- By exalting love and unity above doctrine
- By a desire for intellectual respectability
- By pride of scholarship



*It was niceness that murdered Terry Schiavo. "She wouldn't want to live 'that way'", they said. Apparently, she wanted to be starved to death, so they put her out of her misery. How NICE!*

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*I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR A CHURCH LIKE YOURS - I'M HEAVILY INTO SIN AND HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO DESIRE TO CHANGE.*

- By an attitude of anti-fundamentalism
- By the division of biblical truth into categories of important and not important
- By a general mood of softness and tolerance
- Of a desire for a less strict Christianity
- Of a weariness with theological fighting.

**6. NICE IS A SUBSTITUTE FOR JUST** - Satan is not an initiator but an imitator. There is a Holy Trinity, and there is likewise a Trinity of Evil (**Revelation 20:10**). We read of the "children of God," so also we read of "the children of the wicked one" (**Matthew 13:38**). God works in the former both to will and to do of His good pleasure, then we are told that Satan is "*the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience*" (**Ephesians 2:2**). There a "mystery of godliness" (**1 Timothy 3:16**), so also is there a "mystery of iniquity" (**2 Thessalonians 2:7**). We are told that God by His angels "*seals*" His servants in their foreheads (**Revelation 7:3**), so also we learn that Satan by his agents sets a mark in the foreheads of his followers (**Revelation 13:16**). Christ performed miracles, so also can Satan (**2 Thessalonians 2:9**). Christ is the Light of the world, then so is Satan himself "transformed into an angel of light" (**2 Corinthians 11:14**).

Satan is the arch-counterfeiter. The Devil is now busy at work in the same field in which the Lord sowed the good seed. He is seeking to prevent the growth of the wheat by another plant, the tares, which closely resembles the wheat in appearance. In a word, by a process of imitation he is aiming to neutralize the Work of Christ. Therefore, as Christ has a Gospel, Satan has a gospel too. That gospel is a clever counterfeit of the former. So closely does the *gospel of Satan* resemble that which it parodies, multitudes of the unsaved are deceived by it.



Something unusual happened on former President George H.W. Bush's return to the White House - Republicans and Democrats actually were genuinely nice to each other. President Barack Obama, center, looks at former President George H.W. Bush, right, during a ceremony to recognize the 5k-th Daily Point of Light Award in the East Room of the White House in Washington, Monday, July 15, 2013.

It is to this *gospel of Satan* the apostle refers when he says to the Galatians, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from Him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another, but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the Gospel of Christ" (**Galatians 1:6,7**). This false gospel was being heralded even in the days of the apostle, and a most awful curse was called down upon those who preached it. The apostle continues, "*But though we, or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.*" Let's take a moment and expound, or rather, expose this false gospel.

The *gospel of Satan* is not a system of revolutionary principles, nor yet a program of anarchy. It does not promote strife and war, but aims at peace and unity. It seeks not to set the mother against her daughter nor the father against his son, but fosters the brotherly spirit whereby the human race is regarded as one great "brotherhood." It does not seek to drag down the natural man, but to improve and uplift him. It advocates education and cultivation and appeals to "the best that is within - It aims to make this world such a comfortable and pleasant environment that Christ's absence from it will not be felt and God will not be needed. It seeks to occupy man so much with this world that he has no time or leaning to think of the world to come. It propagates the principles of self-sacrifice, charity and benevolence, and teaches us to live for the good of others, and to be kind to all. It appeals strongly to the carnal mind and is popular with the masses, because it ignores the solemn facts that by nature man is a fallen creature, alienated from the life of God, and dead in trespasses and sins, and that his only hope lies in being born again.