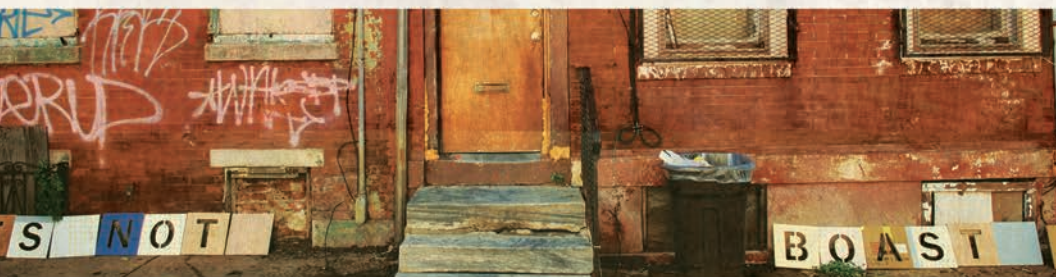




LOVING THE WAY



JESUS LOVES

PHIL RYKEN



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# PREFACE

“To write on the love of God is the Christian theologian’s supreme privilege and supreme responsibility.” Thus says Kevin Vanhoozer, who teaches theology at Wheaton College. In addition to a privilege and a responsibility, to write on the love of God is also this: a theologian’s supreme humiliation.

Presumably, only a lover is able to write about love. Yet if there is one area of my life where I know that I fall short of the character of Christ, it is having true love for God and my neighbor. Nevertheless, my sometimes loveless heart is compelled to testify to the truth of God’s love in Jesus Christ.

This book started with nearly the last sermon series that I preached at Philadelphia’s Tenth Presbyterian Church. The heartfelt, Christlike love of that congregation helped sustain my ministry there for fifteen years. Yet for all the love that we shared as a church family, we still found that we had seemingly infinite room to grow in the love of God. Studying 1 Corinthians 13 in a Christ-centered way helped us—as I hope it will help you—to learn how to love the way Jesus loves.

As a demonstration of their love, several friends and colleagues helped to improve this book as it made its way to publication. Lynn Cohick, David Collins, Lois Denier, Tom Schwanda, and LaTonya Taylor all read the manuscript, making needed corrections and suggesting numerous ways to strengthen the exposition and application of the biblical text. Robert Polen checked facts and offered administrative assistance. Nancy Ryken Taylor prepared the study questions. Marilee Melvin entered the final revisions. Lydia Brownback and other friends at Crossway edited the book and shepherded it

## *Preface*

to the press. These labors of love will help you see the love of Jesus more clearly in the pages of this book.

As I was studying 1 Corinthians 13, I read a testimony from World Harvest Mission that expressed my own need for more of the love of Jesus. A missionary wrote:

Upon returning home from a day of relief supply distribution, I joined my three-year-old daughter in the kitchen. She was drawing a picture of our family. I noticed what appeared to be me standing somewhat at a distance from the rest of the family wearing what was clearly a frown. "Is that Daddy?" I asked. "Yes," came the sheepish reply. "Why am I frowning?" She said, "Daddy, you never smile anymore."

The man proceeded to ask for help. "Pray for me," he wrote. "I want to apply this message of God's love to this cold, hard heart." The missionary's prayer is my prayer, too, and I hope you will make it your prayer as you read this book: "Lord Jesus, apply the gospel of your love to my cold, hard heart."

Phil Ryken  
Wheaton College



## 2

# LOVE THAT IS BETTER THAN LIFE

*Love is kind.*

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4

*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.*

TITUS 3:4–5

The earthly sufferings of Elizabeth Payson Prentiss were painful and prolonged.<sup>1</sup> She struggled her entire life with insomnia and severe headaches that left her exhausted. She also endured the sorrow of loss: two of her children died in short succession. Afterwards, the grieving mother's frail health was nearly destroyed. In the deep distress of her soul, she cried out: "Our home is broken up, our lives wrecked, our hopes shattered, our dreams dissolved. I don't think I can stand living for another moment."<sup>2</sup>

Yet during those dark and desperate days, when her pains and losses led her to think that she could not live even one more day, Elizabeth Payson Prentiss never lost her hope in the love of God. In fact, during those very days she began to write a hymn asking Jesus for more of his love. "More love to thee, O Christ," she prayed. "More love to thee." Then she asked God to use her earthly sorrows to teach her how to love:

Once earthly joy I craved, sought peace and rest;  
Now thee alone I seek; give what is best:



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This all my prayer shall be, more love, O Christ to thee,  
More love to thee, more love to thee!

Let sorrow do its work, send grief and pain;  
Sweet are thy messengers, sweet their refrain,  
When they can sing with me, more love O Christ to thee,  
More love to thee, more love to thee!

What Elizabeth Prentiss found, when she despaired of life itself, was a love that is *better* than life. Later she wrote: “To love Christ more is the deepest need, the constant cry of my soul. . . . Out in the woods and on my bed and out driving, when I am happy and busy, and when I am sad and idle, the whisper keeps going up for more love, more love, more love!”<sup>3</sup>

## LOVE’S PORTRAIT

Where can a suffering soul find more love to Christ and more love for other people? We are finding such love in 1 Corinthians 13, the Love Chapter of the Bible, which the apostle Paul wrote to help the gifted yet divided church in Corinth learn how to love.

Paul began by proving that love is absolutely indispensable. Nothing else matters, only love. No matter how gifted we are, or what we do for God, we are nothing without love. Loveless prophecy, loveless theology, loveless faith, loveless social action, even loveless martyrdom are all equally worthless. Nothing can compensate for the absence of love. John Chrysostom would go even further. When he preached this passage to his congregation in Constantinople sometime during the fourth century, Chrysostom said: “If I have no love I am not just useless but a positive nuisance.”<sup>4</sup>

The problem is that we are less loving than we think we are and a lot less loving than we ought to be. If we want to avoid making a nuisance of ourselves, therefore, we need to learn how to love. First Corinthians 13 helps by sketching the character of love: “Love is

patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (vv. 4–8).

Chrysostom called these verses “an outline of love’s matchless beauty, adorning its image with all aspects of virtue, as if with many colors.”<sup>5</sup> What makes these verses so beautiful is that they are really a portrait of Jesus and his love. The literary technique Paul uses here is called *personification*. He takes the idea of love and describes what love does, as if it were a person. But of course love *is* a person, because Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the love of God. Therefore, everything these verses say about love is characteristic of Jesus. His love is patient and kind; it is not arrogant or irritable; it believes and endures all things; it never fails. So if we want to know what the Love Chapter looks like when it is lived out, all we need to do is look at the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We see the loving humility of Jesus in leaving the glory of heaven to take on the flesh of our humanity. We see his loving patience with all the people who pressed around him for healing. We see his loving submission in Gethsemane, when, on his way to the cross, Jesus did not insist on his own way. We see his loving perseverance in the way he suffered for sin. We see his loving mercy in the forgiveness he offered his enemies. We see his loving trust in asking the Father to raise him from the grave. From beginning to end, our whole salvation is a story of the never-failing love of Jesus, the love of God for us in Christ—what C. S. Lewis called the “Gift-Love” of God.<sup>6</sup>

One way for us to see the love of Jesus is to illustrate the Love Chapter from his life and ministry. This will be our approach to studying 1 Corinthians 13, to take what this chapter says about love and see how Jesus shows us each particular aspect of love. Along the way we will trace the course of his earthly life, his saving death, and his glorious resurrection.

## LOVING THE WAY JESUS LOVES

In following the chronology of Jesus and his love, we will not always follow the exact order of 1 Corinthians 13. This method seems appropriate for our study because this chapter is a portrait rather than a biography. First Corinthians 13 gives us a composite picture of love. To see that picture as clearly as possible, we will connect every word to Christ and then make further connections to our own lives. The love that Jesus has shown to us proves to be the same love that he wants us to show to others. He does not love us merely to love us but also to love others through us as we learn to love the way that he loves.

### ON KINDNESS

We begin with an aspect of love that may seem like a slender virtue. The Scripture says that love is “kind” (1 Cor. 13:4). Most people appreciate kindness—especially when someone is kind to them—but we may not take it very seriously. We talk about being “kind to animals” or showing “kindness to strangers.” To be kind is to share some candy or help a little old lady across the street. But if that is all that kindness does, then saying “love is kind” would give love much less praise than it deserves. In fact, if love is “kind” only in the conventional sense of that word, then the Bible would be putting love at a level we can all reach—even without the grace of God—because everyone is capable of showing at least a little kindness.

If we think that kindness is something small, however, then we must not know the full biblical meaning of kindness or understand the extraordinary kindness of God. Because when we study what the Bible says on this subject, we soon discover that kindness is a high calling, and that the whole story of salvation can be understood as a gracious outworking of God’s extraordinary kindness to us in Jesus Christ.

The word that Paul uses for kindness in 1 Corinthians 13:4 is unique. This is the only place where it appears in the Bible or other ancient literature (apart from later Christian sources that presum-

ably borrowed the term from Paul). The apostle had a way with words, and the word he seems to have invented in this case (*chresteuetai*) is a verb. So rather than saying, “love is kind,” perhaps we should translate the phrase like this: “love shows kindness.”<sup>7</sup>

This is a good place to mention an important feature of 1 Corinthians 13: the words this chapter uses to describe love are not nouns but verbs (there are at least fifteen of them). This means that when Paul says that love is this and isn’t that, he is not giving us an abstract or philosophical definition. Nor is he describing a feeling we have in our hearts. Rather, he is talking about something that we *do*—love as an action, not an affection. As Henry Drummond wrote in his famous little book *The Greatest Thing in the World*, love is “not a thing of enthusiastic emotion” but “a rich, strong, vigorous expression of . . . the Christ-like nature in its fullest development.”<sup>8</sup>

This profound truth—that love is an active verb—helps us understand the biblical teaching on love in a highly practical way. Many Christians worry that they do not feel a particular way toward God. “I know I’m supposed to love God,” we say, “but I don’t always feel very loving. Something must be wrong with my emotions! I claim to follow God, but sometimes I am not even sure I love him.” Then we wonder how we can get more of that loving feeling for God.

The Love Chapter teaches us that love is as love does. “Unlike other loves,” writes the French theologian Ceslaus Spicq, “which can remain hidden in the heart, it is essential to charity to manifest itself, to demonstrate itself, to provide proofs, to put itself on display.”<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that love is something we never feel or that we should ever stop asking the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with warmer affection for God. But when it comes to love, what we do with our deeds is every bit as important, if not more so, than what we say with our words or feel in our hearts. The apostle John said, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). Paul looked at love the same way. He believed

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in loving by doing, not just by talking or feeling. Love is the way we live for God even when we do not happen to feel particularly loving.

When Paul took kindness and turned it into an active verb, he started with a word that comes up fairly frequently in the New Testament: the ordinary noun for kindness (*chrestos*). We see this word in Galatians 5, for example, where it is listed with the “fruit of the spirit” (v. 22). We also see it in Colossians 3, where Paul mentions it as one of the virtues that Christian people should wear as part of our everyday spiritual wardrobe (v. 12). Elsewhere, he says that kindness is characteristic of the ministry of the apostles (2 Cor. 6:6) and commands us to be kind to one another (Eph. 4:32).

When we take these passages together, we see that kindness is one of the ordinary virtues of the Christian life. To be kind is to be “warm, generous, thoughtful, helpful.”<sup>10</sup> To show that such kindness is a verb, Gordon Fee defines it as “active goodness on behalf of others.”<sup>11</sup> Other commentators describe a kind person as someone who is “disposed to be useful” and “freely to do good to others”—definitions that emphasize the readiness and eagerness of kindness to engage in the service of others.<sup>12</sup> Lewis Smedes calls kindness “love’s readiness to enhance the life of another person.”<sup>13</sup>

Some commentators connect kindness to patience, which is also mentioned in verse 4. They think Paul has in mind kindness to enemies, to people who have treated us badly. Thus, in his exposition of this passage, John Chrysostom asked how we should respond to the angry resentments and vengeful passions of people who do us wrong. “Not only by enduring nobly,” he said (that is where the patience comes in), “but also by soothing and comforting,” so that we can “cure the sore and heal the wound” of a broken relationship.<sup>14</sup> Someone who is “too kind” is sometimes described as “killing with kindness,” but according to Scripture, it is also possible for us to *cure* with our kindness, bringing hope and healing to broken people.

## THE LOVINGKINDNESS OF GOD

The best way for us to learn this kind of kindness is to see it in the character of our God, whose love is always ready to enhance the lives of others.

The title for this chapter—“Love That Is Better than Life”—comes from something King David once said about God. David began Psalm 63 by declaring that his soul was thirsty for God, like a dying man in an arid desert. Then, as he began praising and blessing God, he explained why God deserved his worship: “Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you” (Ps. 63:3).

The King James Version uses slightly different terminology. It reads: “Thy *lovingkindness* is better than life.” The words “steadfast love” and “lovingkindness” are attempts to take the rich Old Testament idea of covenant love and express it in the English language. David was praising God for his absolute faithfulness in keeping the love promises that he made to his people by saving them and being their everlasting God. It was because of his lovingkindness that God made Abraham a great nation, delivered Israel out of Egypt, established the kingdom of David, rescued the remnant of his people from Babylon, and performed many other mighty acts of saving deliverance. What the Old Testament calls “lovingkindness” is nothing less than total salvation. And as David understood, to know such kindness is better even than life itself.

The New Testament speaks in similar terms, putting the kindness of God in the context of saving his people. The apostle Paul told the Romans that God’s kindness leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). He said further that it is because of God’s kindness that the gospel is preached to all nations (Rom. 11:22). But perhaps the fullest expression of God’s kindness comes in Paul’s letter to Titus:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly

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through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (3:4–7)

Kindness is not to be underestimated! We may be tempted to see it as something small, but here the Bible takes everything that God has done for our salvation and calls his saving cure a kindness. Consider, then, the lovingkindness of God, as summarized in Titus 3.

To begin with, the kindness of God is a *saving* love. The Scripture says that when God's lovingkindness appeared—this refers to Jesus coming into the world—"he saved us" (Titus 3:5). The most general and comprehensive way to describe what God has done for us is simply to say that he has saved us. Jesus is the Savior, the one who brings deliverance from sin and death. He saves us from the punishment our sins deserve, which is nothing less than eternal damnation. When we say that God is kind, therefore, we are saying that he has rescued us from an eternity in hell.

The kindness of God is also a *merciful* love—a love shown to people who do not even deserve to be loved. Titus 3:5 makes it clear that when God saved us, it was "not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy." We do not save ourselves. We cannot qualify for heaven on the basis of the righteous things that we have done. Leo Tolstoy was right when he said he had not fulfilled even one thousandth of God's commandments—not because he didn't try to, but because he wasn't able to.<sup>15</sup> This is our problem as well—we do not and cannot do all the righteous things we know we ought to do. If God saves us, therefore, it is only because of his kind and loving mercy. It is not because we are lovable, but because he is love.

Further, the kindness of God is a *life-changing* love. Titus 3:5 says God saves us "by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." Regeneration is the inward work of God the Holy Spirit that gives a lifeless sinner new and everlasting life. Here that life-changing work is called "the washing of regeneration." This reminds us of Christian baptism, the sacrament that uses water to

signify cleansing. When the kindness of God comes into your life, it washes away all your sins. It also makes you an entirely new person. This happens immediately when the Spirit takes control, but then it continues for the rest of your life. There is “regeneration,” which is a new spiritual birth, but there is also “renewal,” which is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. God is making us and remaking us as completely new people. We are not what we once were—praise God! We will not remain what we are—praise him again, for this is the kindness of God.

Once I heard a father say that he felt as though his son’s body had been taken over by aliens. All of a sudden the boy was more respectful, obedient, contrite, disciplined, compassionate, and teachable—everything a father hopes for in a son. Then the father realized that he was right: his son had indeed been taken over by an alien and supernatural power. Someone *was* living inside him! It was the Holy Spirit of God in all his life-changing power.

God’s saving, life-changing lovingkindness is also a *generous* love. In his kindness, God has sent us the Holy Spirit, “whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (v. 6). This verse testifies to the triune kindness of God. There is one God in three persons, each person full of lovingkindness. We have already seen the kindness of the Son to come and be our Savior and the kindness of the Spirit to regenerate and renew us. Here we see the kindness of the Father to send us the Spirit through the Son. What the Bible especially emphasizes is the generosity of this gift. The Holy Spirit is something that God has poured out richly. The Spirit is the best of all gifts because he is the gift of God himself. And when God pours out this gift, it is not merely a trickle but a fountain.

There is so much more that we could say about the lovingkindness of God. Titus 3:7 explains why God has poured out his Spirit on us and into us: “so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” This verse testifies to the righteousness and the graciousness of God’s love. In our



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justification God declares that we are righteous. He forgives our sins through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. He also adopts us as his own beloved sons and daughters. The great Presbyterian preacher Henry Boardman said, “Adoption is the highest proof of love which one being can bestow upon another, except dying for him; and Christ has done both for us.”<sup>16</sup>

Then God does something more: he grants us the inheritance of eternal life, promising that we will live with him in his glorious kingdom forever and ever. The lovingkindness of God never comes to an end, because he keeps acting graciously on our behalf forever. His kindness is an *eternal* love.

Once we experience the kindness of God—his saving, merciful, generous, life-changing, eternal kindness to us in Jesus Christ—we can never again think that lovingkindness is something small and insignificant. The lovingkindness of God extends on into eternity. It really is better than life, because when God saves us in his love, we will live forever.

## BE KIND

Have you experienced the kindness of God? Are you able to say, “God has been so kind to me! God the Father has adopted me as his beloved child. Jesus Christ has changed my life. By his death on the cross he has forgiven all my sins. He has given me his Holy Spirit and promised me eternal life. I am a personal recipient of the lovingkindness of God.”

Anyone who is able to testify to God’s kindness is called to show his kindness to others. This is the practical point in both Titus and Corinthians. When 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that “love is kind,” it is not just defining love for us; it is also telling us how to live. The same thing is true in Titus 3. The reason Paul tells Titus about the lovingkindness of God is to help people in his church learn how to love.

The context is important. Titus was the pastor in Crete, and the Cretans were not very kind. Apparently, they needed to be reminded

not to say bad things about people or to get into useless arguments (Titus 3:2). This is not surprising, given what verse 3 says about the way they used to live: passing their days “in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.” We ourselves could make the same confession, because we have the same spiritual need. We are not lovers by nature, but haters.

This is why we need the gospel message of God’s saving kindness. When the apostle wanted to help people learn how to love, he did not simply give them a long list of do’s and don’ts; he also told them the story of Jesus and his love—the life-changing kindness of God in Christ. When that story becomes our own testimony, through faith in Jesus Christ, then we ourselves can live with the same kind of love. As Paul Miller writes in his book *Love Walked Among Us*, “Love begins not with loving, but with being loved . . . we can only give what we have received.”<sup>17</sup> Only through faith in Christ, therefore, can we begin to love the way Jesus loves. *Knowing* the kindness of God enables us to start *showing* the kindness of God.

Every day we have opportunities to enhance the lives of others through kindness, which in some cases may prove to be a *saving* kindness. Not that we could ever be anyone’s savior, of course, or cleanse anyone from sin. It would be folly to try. But one thing we can do is introduce people to the Savior by telling them about Jesus and his love. The greatest kindness that we can ever show to anyone is to share the gospel. So be kind to neighbors and strangers in the kindest way: by inviting them to church, talking with them about spiritual things, and testifying to them about Jesus Christ. The loving work of personal evangelism is the greatest kindness in the world.

The kindness we are called to show is also *merciful* kindness, which means we show it to people who do not even deserve it. In the words of Lewis Smedes, “Kindness is the power to move someone self-centered toward the weak, the ugly, the hurt and to invest in personal care with no expectation of reward.”<sup>18</sup> It is all too easy to divide the world between people who deserve our help and people

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who don't. If God divided the world that way, none of us would ever get any help from him, because none of us would ever deserve it. But we are the recipients of undeserved kindness.

Now we, in turn, are called to show selfless kindness to the very people who have been unkind to us. The gift love of God, writes C. S. Lewis, enables us “to love what is not naturally lovable.”<sup>19</sup> When the Bible tells us to be kind to our enemies, as it often does, it almost always tells us to do them some kind of good (e.g., Matt. 5:44; Rom. 12:21; 1 Thess. 5:15; 2 Tim. 2:24). We are called not merely to put up with people but also to treat them kindly. Do not wait for others to be nice to you before you are nice to them, but treat people as kindly as God has treated you through the cross of Jesus Christ. “If I can write an unkind letter,” wrote Amy Carmichael, “speak an unkind word, think an unkind thought without grief and shame, then I know nothing of Calvary love.”<sup>20</sup>

What else can we say about the kindness God is calling us to show other people? It ought to be a *generous* kindness. Give more to gospel charity, not less. Spend more time—not less—with the sick and the homeless, with needy children and people in prison. Of course, there are times when mercy itself teaches us to say no to a request for help, because it will only fuel a destructive addiction or a life-impoverishing dependency. But instead of thinking, “How can I get out of doing this?” or justifying our desire not to get involved, our first instinct should always be to see if there is a way for us to help.

Sometimes our kindness can even be *life changing*, especially when we show people spiritual kindness. Usually we think of kindness in terms of performing some practical task to help a person with a physical need. But as Jonathan Edwards pointed out in his teaching on 1 Corinthians 13, we should try to show kindness to people's souls. How can we do that? Edwards said we do so by leading them

to the knowledge of the great things of religion; and by counseling and warning others, and stirring them up to their duty, and to a seasonable and thorough care for their souls' welfare; and so again, by

Christian reproof of those that may be out of the way of duty; and by setting them good examples, which is a thing the most needful of all, and commonly the most effectual of all for the promotion of the good of their souls.<sup>21</sup>

Put simply, we show lovingkindness by sharing the Scriptures, by giving wise spiritual counsel, by offering gentle words of rebuke when such words are truly needed, and most of all by setting a godly example. These are all acts of kindness that the Holy Spirit can use for the good of other people's souls.

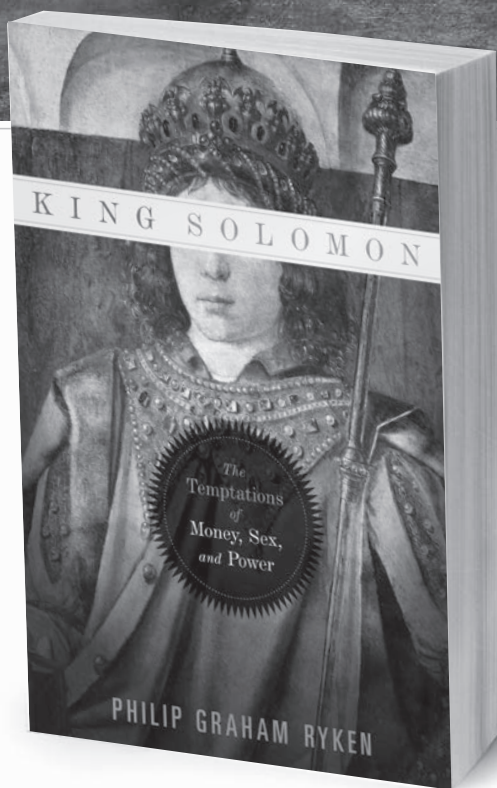
Our kindness could never be *eternal*, of course, the way God's is. Yet there is still a way for us to echo the everlasting kindness of God in our own lives, and that is never to stop showing kindness. If we keep being kind, it will make a difference for Christ and his kingdom. People usually think of kindness as something small, but if every believer made a personal commitment to lovingkindness, it would change the world. The lost would be found. The dying would be delivered. The undeserving would receive grace. The loveless and the unlovable would be loved with an everlasting love.

Tertullian tells us that in the days of the early church, pagans sometimes called Christians "chrestiani" rather than "christiani."<sup>22</sup> The two words sound similar, of course, but there was another reason for the confusion. *Christiani* means "Christians," but *chrestiani* comes from the Greek word for "kindness." According to Tertullian, even when believers were not known as the Christ people, they were still known as the kindness people, and this kindness pointed others to Christ.

What about us? Are we known as people of kindness, or do people more commonly associate Christianity with attitudes that are stingy, judgmental, and hypocritical? Our calling is to live with such love that kindness becomes synonymous with Christianity. Sometimes we say that people will know we are Christians by our love, but here is another way to say the same thing: they will know we are Christians by our kindness.

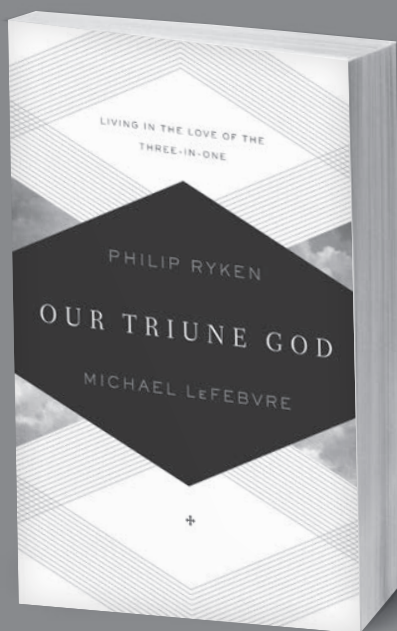


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**PHIL RYKEN** is president of Wheaton College and former pastor of Philadelphia’s Tenth Presbyterian Church. He has written or edited over 30 books, including *King Solomon: The Temptations of Money, Sex, and Power*.

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