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the simple difference

the
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difference

HOW EVERY SMALL KINDNESS
MAKES A BIG IMPACT

becky keife

keife



“Are you overwhelmed by all that’s happening in the world and unsure of what to do about it? Like a good friend and wise guide, Becky Keife is inviting you to take a deep breath and shift your perspective. She shares how small kindnesses can add up to a big difference and why it’s enough to do what you can, wherever you are, for whoever God puts in front of you today. Whew.”

Holley Gerth, bestselling author of *The Powerful Purpose of Introverts*

“With a click of a button or a scroll with my finger, I can effortlessly access inhumane behavior topping the headlines of news sites and social media. While it can feel like we are drowning in an ocean of name-calling, bullying, and forsake-thy-neighboring, Becky reminds us how one simple drop of kindness can ripple into a tidal wave of difference. Becky’s real, lived stories of kindness invite us to consistently drink from a fountain where our nourishment will overflow into the lives we touch daily. She reminds us that persistent kindness may not make the news, but it will make a difference.”

Lucretia Carter Berry, PhD, educator, author,
and president of Brownicity.com

“Want to change the world? Start by looking for ways to make a difference with the people in your path right in front of you—those you encounter at the store, at school drop-off, at church, in your neighborhood, or right in your own home. As Becky Keife so masterfully illustrates in this book, you don’t have to be wealthy or famous or have a bunch of social media followers to impact someone’s life. It’s often the small and seemingly insignificant things that can mean the most! We can’t individually change the world, but we can change an individual’s world. This book will serve as a powerful guide to do just that!”

Crystal Paine, *New York Times* bestselling author,
founder of MoneySavingMom.com, and podcaster

“If you’re like me, when I look back on the most meaningful parts of my life, I recall the kindnesses extended to me in a time of deep grief or stress. Becky has crafted beautiful stories of kindness and compassion that will make you want to be the hands and feet of Jesus in a time when the world seems against each other. I was immediately softened and reminded that everyone is struggling and facing hardships in their own way. To be met with kindness in these moments is a great salve

on our wounds and speaks to the gospel living in us. I hope you'll be both compelled and inspired by Becky's words too!"

Jami Nato, writer, entrepreneur, and plant killer

"Becky Keife's *The Simple Difference* will remind you that you already have all you need to make an impact in this world: the ability to choose kindness. It's a concept we learn in elementary school and teach our own children, yet once our lives become full, stressful, and complicated, we struggle to prioritize it ourselves. Becky's invitation is simple, yet profound: choose kindness daily and not one of your days will be wasted."

Manda Carpenter, author of *Space* and
host of *A Longer Table* podcast

"Becky's transparent writing style and humorous personal stories made this a delightful call to repentance for me. We tend to treat people as they deserve, but she reminds us that Jesus calls us to treat each person as we want to be treated. With kindness. I found it terribly convicting and empowering . . . and hope you will too!"

Bruce W. Martin, author of *Desperate for Hope*

"With a tender heart and a curious mind, Becky gently asks us to remove the armor we've donned in place of extending kindness to our fellow humans. She reminds us of WHY this much-maligned virtue is so important, and how God uses it to gather His people through us. I am so grateful that we have a guide like Becky, rooted in love and compassion, to help us see how a simple difference can change the lives of people around us, as well as our own."

Erin Moon, host of the *Faith Adjacent* podcast,
resident Bible scholar on *The Bible Binge* podcast,
and author of *Every Broken Thing*, *O Heavy Lightness*,
and *Memento Mori*

"This book made me cry happy tears in almost every chapter! Beautifully written from the heart, Becky gives us tangible tips to add more kindness to the world and points us back to the ultimate kind soul, Jesus."

Maghon Taylor, author of *Betty Confetti* and *Happy Hand Lettering*
and founder of AllSheWroteNotes.com

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HOW EVERY SMALL KINDNESS
MAKES A BIG IMPACT

becky keife



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*To Chris,
whose love and partnership is one of
God's great kindnesses in my life.*

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introduction

BE THE BLESSING

Sometimes stories are the runways we need to get up to speed before an idea can take flight. This is a book about the big impact of small kindness. Before we dive into what *the simple difference* is, why it is a message I needed to write, and how it could be the launching pad you need to not only change your life but impact the entire beautiful, fractured, ordinary world around you—before we give those big ideas and lofty dreams wings—I want to tell you a story.

This is the story of the woman I didn't want to sit next to on an airplane—and the way an unexpected flight ignited a powerful spark.

The smell of coffee beans and cinnamon rolls wafted through the crowded terminal. Passengers congregated like impatient sardines near the gate, waiting for the airline employee to announce their boarding group. The flight was assigned seating, so I was happy to wait until the last minute to start breathing recycled air. I was thrilled to be heading to a writers' retreat, but flying is not my favorite. At best, I feel squeezed and queasy; at worst, clear the aisle 'cause I'm sprinting for the lavatory.

I was already starting to feel anticipatory nausea (it's a thing), and the loud shrieking nearby wasn't helping. I looked over and

saw a mom and toddler in front of a vending machine. The little boy stomped his feet until his mom handed him a blue bag of Chips Ahoy.

Cookies at 8:00 a.m. aren't going to help anyone! I thought.

Immediately, a pang of conviction trumped my snap judgment. Surely I have not been above doling out sugary snacks to my own kids to buy myself a few minutes of peace and quiet.

Lord, forgive me for being quick to judge. Please bless this mama with someone kind and loving to sit next to on the plane. Help her to see You in her day. Amen.

The traveling sardines eventually filed down the jet bridge. I followed to 17E. It was a full flight, so I was surprised to find my entire row empty. As I shoved my backpack under the seat, I had a glorious vision: three hours of uninterrupted rest and productivity. With extra space, I'd be able to concentrate on finalizing my speaking notes for the retreat and then catch a little snooze. I'd land ready and refreshed for all God had planned! I adjusted the air vent and closed the shutter. Deep breath. This might actually be a great flight.

Then there they were. The little boy with cookie crumbs on his chin, crawling into the seat next to me. The mom settled in and took off her son's shoes. He wiggled and shrieked and wedged himself on the floor between the seats.

"I just want to apologize in advance," she said softly.

And I knew. I knew God was answering my prayer.

Be the blessing.

I took a deep breath.

"Don't even worry about it," I said. "I have three boys. I know contained spaces can be tough." She smiled weakly.

The flight attendant walked by, checking that seat belts and tray tables were secure. "Ma'am, his seat belt needs to be fastened."

“Come on, Jack. Time to buckle.” She hoisted him off the floor and held up the blue straps. The boy arched his back and yelped loud enough to make heads turn. “You’re okay. You’re okay,” she said in soothing tones and let the seat belt fall back in place, far from her son’s waist. The rule follower in me cringed.

The next three hours were punctuated by screaming and squirming. When Jack’s mom tried to get the toddler to rest in her lap, his feet kicked against my thigh. When the cartoon on her phone ended, when she offered the wrong snack, when he dropped his toy car for the fourteenth time, Jack wailed. His mom stayed calm.

“You’re okay,” she said.

“You’re okay,” he repeated.

Somewhere between the complimentary pretzels and the woman in front of us glaring back *again*, I struck up a conversation. Typical questions: How old is your son? Do you have other kids? Are you headed home or going on a trip? Jack just turned three and had two older step-siblings. They were on their way home to Dallas.

“It’s not easy flying with a little one,” I said. “You’re doing a really great job.”

“Thanks. This is way better than last time.”

I saw a wince of remembrance flash over her face.

“Jack got diagnosed with autism a couple months ago. He’s not very verbal and gets easily frustrated. But he started therapy, and it’s really helping.”

I had hoped this flight would be a quiet space for me to work and rest. That didn’t happen. I didn’t get to prepare for my meetings or take a nap. But I did catch a glimpse of Jesus.

When the seat belt sign dinged on, the flight attendant was quick to check my seatmate’s status. Again, the travel-weary mother tried to comply. Again, Jack refused. But never once did this mama get mad.

Never once did she shame her child or try to justify his behavior. She just loved him.

Before we landed, I leaned over and said, “I just have to tell you, you’re a really wonderful mom. You’ve been incredibly patient and kind in a situation that I’m sure isn’t easy to handle. He’s lucky to have you.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I wasn’t always like this. But I learned quickly that I can make it worse or help him as best I can. He’s a good boy, even when it’s hard.”

The engines hummed louder as we made our final descent. Jack nuzzled closer to his mama. With a stranger’s tiny toes pressed against me, all I could think was: What if we’re supposed to *be* the answer to our prayer? What if we changed the way we prayed?

Instead of, *Lord, bless them—Lord, prepare me to be a blessing.*

Instead of, *Lord, show them kindness—Lord, empower me to be kind.*

Instead of, *Lord, provide—Lord, give me eyes to see and a willingness to give.*

I deboarded the plane and was grateful for room to stretch my legs. Just beyond the gate I passed a vending machine with a row of bright blue-packaged cookies. I looked back over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of Jack. I mulled over the truth like a student rehearsing exam facts she doesn’t want to forget: *Appearances never tell the whole story. Appearances never tell the whole story. Be the blessing. Be the blessing.*

Three years later and I’m still rehashing this story in my mind. I don’t know if Jack’s mom felt as marked by our thirteen hundred shared air miles as I did. I don’t know if she thinks back on our flight with fondness for the lady by the window who didn’t act irritated. But I know that I will always remember that day with gratitude for the way it flipped a switch in my heart. How it altered my awareness and my purpose.

Bearing witness to a woman's kindness to her son changed me. Choosing love and patience for the good of two strangers changed me.

She and I could have so easily made different decisions. Speaking for myself, it would have been easy to put in earbuds and blast George Winston in a forced attempt to focus on my work or relax. I could have reacted to each of Jack's shrieks or made it known that he was invading my personal space. (I know how to give a powerful stink eye and employ exaggerated twitches every time I'm bumped.) That would have been my natural tendency—sad as it is to admit. But moving beyond my normal preference to an intentional, others-centered perspective reshaped those hours up in the sky.

Be the answer to my prayer for kindness. *Be* the one who sees a stranger through God's eyes of love and compassion instead of my own judgment and inconvenience. It was only Jesus in me that prompted me to get off the high horse of my own annoyance in the airport terminal and even think to pause in prayer for this struggling mama-son pair. I'm so grateful the Lord gave His Spirit to whisper to mine.

But it's not enough just to hear. Our faith grows legs for change when we turn that hearing into doing.

The small shift from self-focused to others-focused, from perception to action, is the beginning of the simple difference.

The thing about love and kindness, or the lack thereof, is that we can rarely (maybe never fully) grasp its impact. I'm sure each of us can recall the heart-swelling care we felt when someone really saw us, when we received an unexpected kind word or gesture at just the time we needed it. I have saved voice mails and texts from friends when their messages were well-timed lifelines of affirmation and assurance. I digest their encouragement like long-lasting soul nourishment. Those things mark us. On the flip side, you can likely remember with sharp clarity a stinging, jarring, painful word, look, or encounter, be it from

a friend or stranger. We deeply internalize the harsh, the damaging. Wounds of unkindness and injustice—they add up. They also mark us.

Through the gift of flying next to Jack and his mom, I saw with fresh eyes how our lives are made up of millions of moments stitched together with countless opportunities to decide what kind of mark we're going to leave.

At the airport, dry cleaners, doctor's office, or school pickup; where you worship, work, walk, and shop; when you're coming and going, when you're waiting and complaining; whether you're dancing in the rain or limping through the desert, on a dusty country road or a slick city street—in all places at all times, you and I have a choice: What kind of difference are we going to make?

Are we going to go through life on the autopilot of our own convenience and personal preference? Or will we learn to live eyes wide open to the individual beauty and needs of the people around us? Are we willing to make our daily errands and agendas an ongoing opportunity to live soft and surrendered to the Holy Spirit's leading?

This isn't about totally changing the course of our lives; it's about letting God change us and work through us in the very midst of our ordinary days. To say, *As I go on my way, Lord, have Your way with me.*

That flight from LAX to DFW is just one small glimpse of what intentional kindness looks like. I share it not to toot my own horn but to illustrate the kind of opportunities we all have to choose kindness on any given Thursday. Throughout this book we're going to examine a plethora of examples—not so we can create a mountain of goodness to climb or add more obligations to our crowded to-do list or heap on the weight of added expectations we can't carry. No.

This isn't a book that's going to tell you to do more. This is a book that's going to help you to *see*.

Question-asking is often the beginning of seeing.

We discover this nowhere more clearly than in the passage of Scripture known as the parable of the good Samaritan. We'll unpack this more later, but the primary question reverberates throughout the centuries: "Which of the three became a neighbor?"¹ It's a question-shaped shovel that digs to the heart of who was willing to see and respond.

I have a whole lot of questions of my own these days. I've got a hunch I'm not the only one. Questions like: In a world marked by division, how do we respect our differences and live in harmony? In a culture that praises likes and follows yet fosters isolation, how do we cultivate meaningful connections? When despair runs rampant, is real hope possible? When competition is elevated, is compassion still relevant? And at the end of the day, can one person really make any difference at all?

What if the answer to these big, complex questions had roots in a small, simple movement? I believe it does. It's called *the simple difference*—living the big impact of small kindness.

Turn on the evening news or spend fifteen minutes on Facebook and it's easy to feel like there is a war on humanity and everybody's losing. From divisive politics to strained race relations, school violence to mental illness, poverty and homelessness and cultural hopelessness. When the blue glow looks bleak, it's easy to keep on scrolling. It's easy to feel like the world is in a downward spiral and there's nothing we can do to change it, so why not just keep a low profile in our own protective bubbles. Bubbles that keep our heads to the ground and lives to the grind and don't make space for saying yes to being a neighbor. But when injustice gets too loud or unkindness hits too close to home, what will we do? Where will we go? When will we stop name-calling and complaining and start being part of the life-marking and change-making?

I get a little passionate, a little heated up because I care so much. But you've got to know this isn't a book about economic strategy, social divides, or political lines. We're not going to solve the world's

problems—or perhaps even agree on what they are—in the span of two hundred pages. What I do believe is that through this book we can come to agree that every life counts, and the currency of our small kindness adds up to a big impact.

I hope we will make individual commitments to live out the greatest commandment and the second one like it: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” And “Love your neighbor as yourself.”² As we learn to love in ways we never before contemplated or considered, starting in our own homes and neighborhoods, our personal pledges have the capacity to create collective momentum.

Imagine every person tosses a stone of kindness into their personal pond of influence, creating a ripple. My pond will be different than your pond, which will be different from the one belonging to the woman on Instagram and the guy across town. But what if every person in your family or at your church or on the planet cast a stone into their pond. Eventually the ripples would overlap. And like a tidal wave of kindness sweeping over our communities—the landscape of lives will be changed in its wake.

The simple difference. The simple difference. Hear the rhythm of the waves lapping up on the shore of your heart. *Every small kindness makes a big impact.*

At this point your heart might be swelling with emotion; maybe you’re nodding your head, saying, “Yes! I’m in! I want to make a difference!” But perhaps you’re also thinking, “Cut the hyperbole, Becky. Is this just a lot of hype? Another do-good bandwagon looking for a crowd to hop on before the wheels pop off?”

Please know that I hear you. I’m a flipping coin of passionate optimism and healthy skepticism because nobody’s got time for a fad or phase without hope of real truth or change.

If you're not already a believer in the power of small kindness, I probably can't convince you of it in one opening introduction. But I hope to pique your interest enough to make you want to say yes to this invitation to learn more about the simple difference. Say yes knowing that you go with a guide, a fellow journeyer, who has grappled with similar questions as you have.

Over and over I've asked: When the problems are so deep and wide, what can one person really do?

Through my wrestling and Bible searching, through story collecting and my own simple difference living, I've still got a lot of questions. But I'm completely sure of this: our small, sometimes barely perceptible acts of love, kindness, and encouragement can not only put a little ripple in the currents of hate and blame, loneliness and hopelessness, they are enough to actually change the tide. When people live out the simple difference, it ushers in wave upon crashing wave of humility, mercy, and grace until the faces and culture they touch no longer look the same.

Living the big impact of small kindness is how we mark the world with love in Jesus's name.

God will call some people to massive platforms and shiny stages. He will send some to remote locations in distant places. We can cheer on the big-name influencers and overseas missionaries. We can (and should) pray for their clout and ministries and everything the "professionals" do to affect the world for kingdom good. But there's an urgent news flash we all need to hear: influence isn't reserved for people with X number of bank account dollars or Instagram followers. Impact isn't retained as a reward for those with certain letters behind their names or organizations headlining their fame. Most of us are called to classrooms or boardrooms, hospital rooms, washrooms, or LEGO-scattered living rooms. Our location and job description do not dictate our capacity for impact.

We are *all* born to be difference makers. There are endless opportunities to influence our families, churches, neighborhoods, and communities just by going about our daily lives. A kind word, a helping hand, a sincere prayer—these really are the little things that can make a big difference to the person you're face-to-face with.

The simple difference says, *I will put on a posture of kindness. I will look for ordinary ways to be the blessing in someone's day. I will notice others, encourage generously, and serve joyfully out of the abundance of God's loving grace.*

But please don't mistake simple for surface. We're going to dive deep into exactly what all these nice-sounding words mean.

Are you with me?

I'm imagining it already . . . a global family of simple difference makers.

What if every traveler were quick to extend kindness to their fellow seatmate? What if every neighbor were ready to fill in the gap of assumptions with grace instead of judgment? What if every boss and coworker and grocery store shopper went out of their way to meet the needs of others? Let's infiltrate every school and workplace, every subway and bus stop and yogurt shop. The world will start to wonder who we are.

They will soon come to know us by our mark—ordinary, consistent, extravagant kindness.

one

why kindness

I grew up in the eighties, when Mister Rogers wasn't old-school, as my kids would say; he *was* school! Daily I'd sit captivated by the friendly man whose smile radiated through the square box in my living room. I was eager to escape to a world of make-believe via a bright red trolley while learning about things like sharing and caring, dealing with angry feelings, and the importance of practicing. The "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood" theme song became a soundtrack of my childhood. As dear Mister Rogers exchanged his suit coat for a cardigan and his dress shoes for sneakers, I waited expectantly for his ultimate singsong question: "Please, won't you be my neighbor?" My preschooler heart was forever ready with a resounding yes!

There have been books written and movies scripted about the amazing life and legacy of Fred Rogers. Don't be surprised if a few of his sage words make it into these pages. But the thing about the Mister Rogers phenomenon that struck my childhood delight more than thirty years ago is the same thing that is still resonating in my

heart today: it feels good to be wanted. It is a powerful thing to be seen—to belong.

That simple question, Won't you be my neighbor? is more than the ending of a catchy children's song. It's a declaration of acknowledgment, an invitation of acceptance. Mister Rogers wanted a neighbor just like you and me because he saw deep value in every person. "As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has—or ever will have—something inside that is unique to all time," Rogers explained.¹

As much as I love being on the receiving end of the unconditional acceptance the famous PBS children's program host offered his viewers, I feel compelled to ask the uncomfortable question: Am I really willing to offer unconditional acceptance in return? Can I say with Fred's same sincerity, "Please, won't you be my neighbor?" Can I say it to every person my life intertwines with or touches? Am I ready to be a neighbor to anyone my sleeve brushes?

Honestly? Not yet. But I want to. I believe that's what we're called to.

As we begin this simple difference journey, I'd like to hold up a question for us to examine: Why does kindness matter?

Put it in your palm. Stretch your arm way out and look at it. Turn it over. Pop the question into your mouth. Put it in your mind. Roll it around. *Why does kindness matter?* It's the question we've got to answer because if kindness doesn't matter then there's no point in pursuing a life that is shaped by it.

There have been many people who have made an indelible mark on the world with their kindness. Certainly Fred Rogers comes to mind, along with Mother Theresa, Princess Diana, and Corrie ten Boom. Perhaps you think of Nelson Mandela, who ended apartheid in South Africa, or Mahatma Gandhi, who changed the world through

nonviolent resistance. Maybe if you know the name Jonas Salk you'd put him on a kindness pedestal for saving millions of children with his development of a successful polio vaccine, which he chose not to patent in order to increase accessibility (by default forfeiting billions in patent revenue).² Each one of these historical figures made an impact on society. But the question of why kindness matters cannot hinge on their examples.

It's not enough to pattern our lives after good people.

Why? Because the expression of authentic, love-driven kindness *will* look different for each of us. The unique people we will meet and the personal and varied circumstances that stitch our days together make the simple difference a one-of-a-kind journey. If we try to copycat the life and legacy of another, we're going to fall short.

I'm not meant to be a pioneer in children's television or a nun who cares for the dying or a secret smuggler of hunted Jews. Chances are these things aren't part of your life trajectory either. In addition to their *means* of impacting the world, each person's *motives* are likely to be equally as varied: expand access to early childhood development resources, ease the suffering of the hurting, save innocent lives, dismantle systemic racism, and on and on. We can all probably agree these pursuits are valuable! But we might not all be called, compelled, or equipped to give our lives to their mission.

Can we learn about kindness from the lives of remarkable men and women? Absolutely. We can identify common character traits and behaviors, like compassion, generosity, perseverance, sacrifice, and creativity. But we can't replicate how small, daily, on-your-way acts of intentional kindness look in someone else's life.

I can only show up to my life. You can only show up to yours.

(Not to mention the fact that even great people—remarkable and compassionate world-changing kinds of people—are still imperfect,

and not everything about their lives ought to be held as the standard of excellence and imitation.)

So we can see how it's problematic to hold up a particular person as the defining reason of why kindness matters and make them our guiding example of how to live it. Well, there is one exception. One person we can and should turn our attention to who is both the answer and the model.

His name is Jesus.



Jesus Christ. God's only Son. Fully God who humbled Himself to live concurrently as fully man. Jesus, a carpenter who bled, a friend who wept, a leader and preacher and healer, and ultimately our Savior-Redeemer. Yeah, *He's* the only infallible standard. He's the *why* we can hang our simple difference journey on with assurance.

But if you don't know Jesus, if you doubt that the description I just gave is true, if you wanted a book about changing the world through kindness but didn't realize it was going to be steeped in all this Jesus-Bible-God talk, *please do not tune out or close this book*. I implore you to keep reading. Your questions and personal perspective are welcome here. Jesus wasn't afraid of skepticism and neither am I. Perhaps in your pursuit of a life of kindness, which is a commendable endeavor, you'll discover a kindness more real and radical than you ever thought possible—a kindness available to you through a relationship. I sure hope you do. Either way, there are stories in the pages ahead that are sure to make you think, infuse hope in your heart, and encourage you to live this one precious life well. So keep reading.

Now, back to Jesus. Born of a flesh-and-blood mother, the God-child who lived a sinless life and surrendered to a brutal death in order to pay off the incalculable debt of my sins and yours and every person

who ever breathed an earthly breath—Jesus—is the epitome of God’s kindness. This is where we must start.

Here’s the broad stroke, bird’s-eye view of the story of humanity, which is essential to knowing why kindness matters. (Hang with me. This will be worth it.)

God created man and woman. Upon Satan’s twisted words and tempting, the man and woman chose to disobey God and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Sin entered the world. Thus, an impassable gap became wedged between God and people. Their perfect peace, unity, and intimacy was forever broken. Shame and pain, toil and strife rushed onto the scene and wouldn’t leave. This could have been the end of the story.

But God.

But God loved what He made, for He carefully and purposefully formed the first man and woman in His image. He breathed His own breath into their lungs and imprinted His likeness on the soul and sinew and every DNA strand of every person born since. God didn’t want to remain separate from His creation. Love compelled Him to bridge that impassable gap of self-serving disobedience and brokenness called sin. For several generations, a temporary bridge called the Law was used. It was constructed with boards that looked like endless rules and sacrifices with limited and short-lived power. In many ways, the Law was less like a wooden bridge and more like a wobbly tightrope—few had the courage or stamina to cross it. Most jumped off while tiptoeing along because another way looked easier. And only a restricted group of people was even allowed access to this narrow and difficult bridge of redemption. The Israelites alone were God’s chosen people who were invited to remain tethered to their Creator—and even they strayed from His love and protection (again and again and again). This wasn’t enough for God.

God wanted to restore His relationship with *all* people.

So He offered a new bridge. One that would forever fill the gap created by sin. One that wouldn't crumble when a person fell short of upholding the Law. One that wouldn't need to be reconstructed over and over with flawless lambs on an altar or good works offered. One that wouldn't shatter under the weight of unbelief. This bridge was to be hewn from an unbreakable material. This bridge was the shape of a cross with Jesus stretched palm to palm across it. Nails were driven into the flesh of His hands and bones of His feet, sealing the purpose of the bridge with His pain. It's a graphic picture, I know. It should make our stomachs turn and souls ache. Strange as it may sound, this gruesome sight is also the breathtaking beauty of God's kindness.

If you know this story well, keep reading like it's a fresh revelation. We need to hold this truth with renewed awe and reverence. Let it mark you and unmake you and rebirth you. If this is like a foreign language, take a deep breath. Don't worry if you feel out of your element or in over your head. Ask God for eyes to see and ears to hear. He's got something for you here. We'll walk it out together.

The gospel story I recounted above is the radical kindness of God.

It's God's loving-kindness that He allowed Jesus—His beloved Son—to bleed red till the last breath left His heaving chest so that the red of our debt could be wiped clean. Jesus died so that you and I could live free.

I'm a mom of three boys, and I can't even fathom for one split second sacrificing a son for the freedom of others. I'm also a woman who has missed the mark more times than I can count. I've lied and cheated and coveted what someone else had. I've given my heart to pride, lust, and greed. I've torn others down to build myself up. I've purposefully disobeyed God because I thought I knew better. In other words, I'm

a sinner. Our stories may be different, but I know sin is somewhere a part of yours too.

Our lives are like an overdrawn account with line after line after line of crimson debt too long and deep to ever pay our way out. The withdrawals of poor choices and bad attitudes, not-so-white lies, and justified deceit keep piling up faster than any good deeds can try to cancel them out. Add bitterness, unforgiveness, gossip, and unchecked anger to the ledger. Yet somehow the account is miraculously PAID IN FULL. We didn't do anything to earn this cancellation of our debt. It was a gift. From our heavenly Father.

This is what God's voice sounds like in the middle of our sin. Lean in and listen. These words are for you.

I see you're weighed down. Let Me unload the burden. I see you're flailing and feel like you're drowning. Here's a lifeline that will never slip away. Just grab hold of My hand. I've made a way for you. You're no longer shackled by debt. You can breathe. And don't worry about paying Me back or losing this gift. You can't. It's yours forever. Because I love you and I want to spend today and eternity free and with you.

(Take a breath. Pause. Respond.)

You should know that I have tried to earn my way out of spiritual debt. I've tried to be good enough, moral enough, successful enough, even kind enough to make up for all the yuck in my life. With slick words and sleek curves, with people's approval and impressive accolades, I've tried to fill the gap in my soul that keeps me separated from God. We weren't meant to be separate. We were meant to be connected. We were meant to be loved. And we are.

The reason my little-girl heart awakened to Mister Rogers's song is because I was and am wired to be unconditionally wanted and welcomed. We all are. But not just by our parents or friends or a TV personality. We are wired for connection with our Creator. Yet there's no way

we can clean ourselves up enough to make that happen. God doesn't ask us to. Instead He does this: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."³

For the people in the back, WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS, Jesus died for us.

Not after you got your act together or put a shiny filter on your life. Not after you swept all your misdeeds under the rug or tried to compensate for your junk with enough sacrifices and sorries. While you were messy, lonely, ashamed, overwhelmed, broken, and lost, God nailed His love for you to the cross so you could cross the bridge from death to life. Can you imagine a greater kindness?

Scripture says it plainly: "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."⁴

In the words of Paul, "Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?"⁵

If you haven't accepted Christ's payment for all the ways you've missed the mark and fallen short, accepted the free gift of His love and eternal life, you can do that right now.

A gift needs to be received. God's kindness requires a response. The first step is to cross the bridge. Then to show others the way. A life of love and kindness is like arrows pointing people there.

During Jesus's time on earth He shared life with a close group of friends. As He was preparing them to carry on the ministry after His impending death (which His friends didn't fully grasp), Jesus didn't hand over a huge parchment manual with eighty-seven steps on "How to Change the World." He didn't quiz His disciples on the Jewish law. He didn't make them take an oath of perfection or promise to wear a What Would Jesus Do bracelet. Instead He gave them one key instruction:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”⁶

As I have loved you . . . The heart of the simple difference stems from understanding God’s heart toward us. He loves us. Deeply, lavishly, practically, sacrificially. Begin to grasp the love of God, begin to understand how it can transform your life, and you can begin to live a life of transformative kindness. “We love because he first loved us.”⁷

I’m so grateful I don’t have to carry the burden of perfectly remembering and following a bunch of rules and regulations in order to guarantee my salvation and leave a mark on this world. I’m so grateful Jesus made another way: love God and love others.

As we’ll unpack more in the pages to follow, Jesus’s expressions of kindness took many different forms. Kindness isn’t always conventional. Kindness isn’t always tame. It’s not wrapped with a bow. Jesus displays a type of kindness that catches people by surprise, gets up in their business, up under their skin. His kindness *is* skin to skin. The kind that washes filthy feet and draws in the dirt instead of throwing stones. The kind that puts mud on eyes, and arms around friends, and touches those whom others deem untouchable, unapproachable, unlovable.

As we look at the threads of who God is, His heart toward people, and how Jesus lived it out, all the strands connect back to the beginning: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”⁸ In His own image: *imago Dei*. God imprinted His likeness on *every person* who has walked or will walk this earth. Every man, woman, and child has intrinsic, God-given value. He didn’t assign more worth to one life and less to another. The way Jesus lived, loved, and served showed that He sees every person as *wonderfully made*. No one is disqualified because of age, ethnicity, job, shady past, or circumstance.

When others condemned, Jesus forgave. When others turned away, Jesus drew near. When others judged and scoffed and made clubs for the haves and have-nots, the good and not-good-enough, Jesus threw His arms wide open and said, “Come.” He said let’s eat together and sit together. He told them His story and listened to theirs. He didn’t reserve His kindness for those who deserved it. Deserving kindness is a myth! None of us deserve it or earn it. The kindness of God is coiled around His mercy and grace—unmerited favor freely given.

Unmerited favor freely given. Wrap your mind around that. Let it wrap around your heart. This is what God extends to us so that we can extend it to others.

The way Jesus saw people made all the difference.

In the same way, *seeing others* as purposeful, beautiful, valuable image bearers of God is foundational to living the simple difference.

Our eyes naturally try to size up how someone looks or acts and then we assign our own meaning to what we observe, which then moves us to respond according to what we think someone deserves. We need some vision retraining. We need to understand, accept, and purpose to see the imago Dei in others. Look for, remember, call out, and honor the divine image in every human vessel.

Do you see how essential this is?

If we merely see people through their actions and outward appearance, we’re bound to withhold our love and kindness. When I look around me, I often see people who are irritating, annoying, or off-putting. I see people whose attitudes need adjustments and outlooks need an overhaul. When I see people like this, I don’t want to be kind, I want to give them a swift kick in the tush and tell them to get it together! (Yikes, honesty isn’t always pretty.)

But when I take off the lens of my own biases and self-interest and put on the lens that shows that every person who irks or offends me is

also made in God's image—game changer. My heart begins to soften. Compassion begins to grow. And I remember again that I too am a sinful, irritating person who is loved by God and saved by His grace.

I am imago Dei. So are you.



It should be crystal clear by now that what I propose in this book is not my natural disposition. Please don't think this stuff comes easy for me. I'm no kindness poster child. I'd much rather slap Mister Rogers or Mother Teresa on any billboard to represent the simple difference. My likeness is quick to reveal my gross lack of qualifications.

Kindness is all about love, service, and compassion. Me? Take a gander at the qualities on my kindness résumé:

- impatient
- easily irritable
- self-focused
- introverted
- lover of routines and predictability
- concerned with my own comfort

I hope you're appreciating my intense effort at honest self-reflection and disclosure. I'm doing it so that if you ever get discouraged or feel like you don't have the right personality or temperament for a life marked by kindness, you can come on back here to my little list and know that you're not alone.

Just last night my lack of natural kindness was on display.

My oldest son, Noah, had basketball practice at a time slot that ends later than his normal bedtime, which I find annoying. Then

practice inevitably ran long. When it was finally over, we speedwalked down the long ramp from the gymnasium to the car. The cold night air nipped at the quarter inch of ankle exposed between my cuffed jeans and low boots. A chill shot up my whole body. We got in the car and I blasted the heater as Noah chatted about practice. What time was his upcoming game and did I see his layup? I backed out of my parking spot, ready to whip out of the lot and get home, stat. But I couldn't. The coach was standing in the middle of the aisle talking to another parent. I slowly scooted forward, expecting my bright headlights and humming engine would be clear indicators that a motor vehicle would like to drive through the driving area. Please and thank you. The coach took one *small* step to the side. He was still blocking the way.

In this ordinary, Tuesday-night moment, I wasn't thinking about kindness. I was thinking about me. I glared through the dark windshield, willing the coach to see my dagger eyes, have a little consideration, and MOVE out of the way. He didn't. I maneuvered my car as close as I could to the row of parked cars and barely squeezed by.

"Seriously?" I seethed through gritted teeth.

I made a sharp left out of the parking lot, irritated and exasperated that my journey home was delayed by a whopping five minutes. (Okay, it was probably more like ninety seconds . . . or less.) Noah was already inquiring about what was for breakfast tomorrow while flipping through radio stations to find a good song. And like a lyric I couldn't shake, the question rose in my mind, *What happened to the simple difference? What happened to living the big impact of small kindness?*

And here's where I emphasize that I'm not a kindness expert but a broken, jaded, impatient fellow human on the journey—who more often than not feels like a kindness imposter.

I share this because you've got to know this book isn't written by or for the saintly and sinless (which last time I checked is none of us). This book is for you if in the confines of your own car or house or mind you struggle with impatience and irritation, entitlement and apathy. You're welcome here if you make sarcastic comments under your breath. Pull up a chair and lean in if it's easier to think about your own wants, needs, and preferences than someone else's. If you're a good person and you want to do right by the world, but when you're bare-bones honest you have to admit that kindness is *not* your natural inclination either—hi, you're in good company.

I lay in bed last night thinking about how that brief parking lot moment was a missed opportunity to not only show kindness to another human but to model it for my son. I'm sure the coach didn't give it a second thought. My boy probably didn't either. But what if instead of being consumed by my irritation and impatience, I had taken a deep breath? What if I had viewed that extra moment as a gift? To look my son in the eyes. Ask him a question. Listen to the answer.

What if instead of glaring through the windshield I rolled down the window and gave a genuine smile and friendly wave, and offered a sincere, "Thanks again, Coach! I appreciate you investing your time in our boys. Have a great night!" How might that have changed my mood? How might it have touched the man who just gave over an hour of his time to help a scraggly group of eleven-year-olds learn a little more about basketball?

What if instead of living a message of "seriously, hurry up" in front of my son, I let my life speak of slowing down, paying attention, and valuing each person?

Seeing people as individuals whom God loves instead of obstacles to our own comfort and convenience requires us to intentionally change our agenda and perspective.

the simple difference

Here's to slowing down.

Opening our eyes.

Giving our lives.

Remembering that we can love others in backyards, coffee shops,
airports, and parking lots—because God first loved us.



THREE KEYS TO LIVING

the simple difference

Pray it bold.

God, thank You for loving me enough to make me in Your image and rescue me from my sin. Help me to grasp the depth of Your loving-kindness so that I can love others in the same way. I want to know Your love as more than a fact in my head but a living knowledge in my heart. Train my vision to see the beauty and value You've handcrafted in every person. Amen.

Live it now.

- Start the day looking in the mirror and reminding yourself that you are loved and chosen by God.
- Consciously practice slowing down in your daily going.
- Notice the people around you and actively remember that they are also loved by God.

Say it loud.

I don't have to be a kindness poster child to be a simple difference maker.

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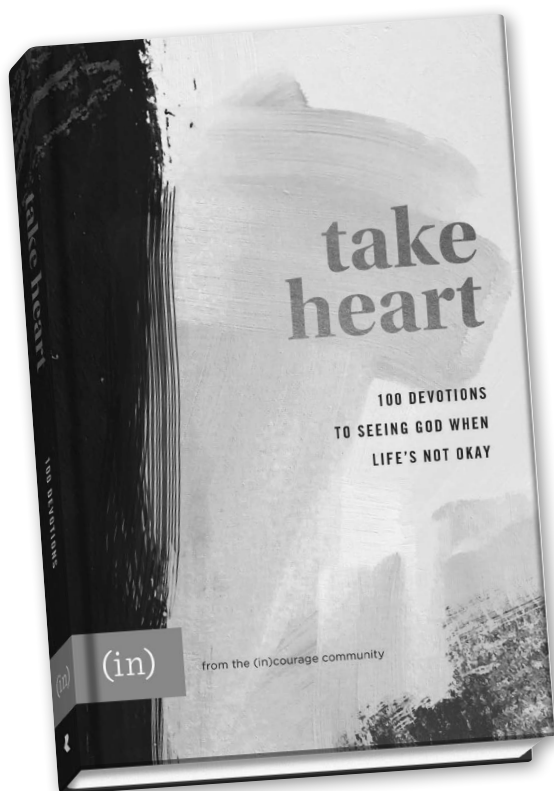
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