



THE ONE YEAR DAILY ACTS OF KINDNESS DEVOTIONAL

Kindness Dare
7-Day Kindness Challenge

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Inviting Others In

Kendra

Practice hospitality. Romans 12:13

Several years ago, when I was a young, working, unmarried woman, I was invited to a group at my church where the older women took us into their homes and taught us favorite recipes and tips for keeping a home, raising a family, and entertaining others. Each week for eight weeks, we shared a meal together, asked practical questions, read Scripture, and prayed for one another.

I loved those evenings together, and what struck me most was the feeling I experienced when I was with these ladies. As women who were many years older than I was, they exuded love, kindness, and a comfortableness with inviting others into their lives like I hadn't seen before. It wasn't a showy or extravagant way to entertain, but more of a deep desire for others to know and feel the love of God while they were in women's homes.

I still remember one woman telling us how she was embarrassed by the weathered sheets she had to use in her guest bedroom and how she wished she'd been able to buy something new, but she couldn't on her family's tight budget. God reminded her that it was the way she took care of her guests that mattered most. She told us how she'd place a jar with a washcloth, some travel essentials, and verse of Scripture next to the bed whenever guests stayed to make sure they felt loved.

I still think of that woman today when I invite others over, and I hope she can be a reminder for you too. The scratches on your table or the wear on your couches are not what matter. People will remember the warmth of conversation and the love they felt just by being with you.

Your Turn: Think of a time someone invited you to their house or into their life. What did they do or say that made you feel welcomed in?

Dare of the Day: Invite someone over to your house. (Tip: If dinner seems overwhelming, order pizza or invite them over for snacks or appetizers. Do what feels comfortable for you! If you're concerned about what to do or say, playing games together can be a great way to get to know others and put everyone at ease.)



Our Actual Neighbors

Kendra

Love your neighbor as yourself. Mark 12:31

“This is just so awkward,” I muttered under my breath as my husband and I strode across our street to visit with our neighbor, who was sitting outside enjoying the sunshine, an evening ritual I’d observed for the past several years from the safety of my own yard or front window.

But tonight was different.

Just a few days earlier we’d left our Sunday morning gathering with the challenge from our pastor—*what if Jesus actually meant that you are to love your literal neighbor, the person right next door or across the street?*

My husband and I knew God was nudging us to get to know those around us better, and this seemed like the perfect time. My extroverted husband had already planned a gathering for the coming weekend—complete with a buffet and a local musician sharing his most recent album—so we just knew it’d be the perfect way to invite our neighbors over as well.

That is how I found myself awkwardly walking across my street, willing myself to invite a man I’d known only in passing to a gathering at our house.

The amazing thing (at least to me) about our short walk across the street? He was incredibly kind and thrilled to be invited. He said of course he’d love to come. That started a beautiful relationship with our neighbors, which continues to this day.

As I think back on that time and ask myself why it was so hard for me, I realize it was simply because I was trying to do something new. Doing something different can be hard or awkward. But just because something is unfamiliar doesn’t mean it’s not worth trying.

I’m so glad I ignored the awkward feelings and started building relationships with my neighbors. They are some of the most kind and generous people I know and have offered support to my little family just when we’ve needed it—and we’ve been able to do the same for them.

Your Turn: *Can you think of a time when you were new (at a job, in a neighborhood, or at a church) and someone extended a welcome to you? How did it make you feel?*

Dare of the Day: *Be intentional today to meet a neighbor that you do not know. (Tip: Cookies or some kind of treat are an easy icebreaker. Don’t worry if you aren’t a baker; store-bought treats are fine too!) If you have kids, let them make little cards to put with the treats.)*



Overcoming the Fear of Otherness

Julie

[Jesus said,] “Now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” John 13:34-35

As we waited on a bus bench in the heart of downtown Minneapolis, a slight stench of urine wafted over toward my kids and me whenever the breeze blew. We were on an urban adventure, and I was navigating unfamiliar territory with my two kids in tow.

Though I’m ashamed to say it now, when a young man sauntered by and then circled back around to stand next to our bench, my senses went on high alert. I felt a twinge of fear simply because he did not look like me, did not come from my same subculture, and was *other*. This was not a case of me responding to any actual danger; this was me being nervous around someone who doesn’t hail from my comfortable circles. In a word, *racist*.

Conviction washed over me as that horrible label bounced around in my head. I silently cried out to God, asking for forgiveness. I prayed for wisdom on how to push past my hesitation and asked God to help me be a more loving person than my initial reaction indicated.

I fished around for something to say: “Um . . . did you see all the people piling out of that car down there?” I asked, nodding toward what looked to be an older black sedan about a block down the street from us. “Is that a clown car or what?” I continued, chuckling a bit as I commented. And that did it. The ice was broken through a funny conversation about the limo (the perspective from my head-on angle was deceptive) and the twelve people who had come spilling out. As we waited for the bus for the next several minutes, our conversation ranged widely and flowed effortlessly, and we parted on a comfortable silence.

Otherness comes in so many different forms. Any perceived difference can be used to justify boundaries, borders, barriers, and walls—all artificial constructs that separate instead of pull us into community.

How do we tear down those walls? With intentionality. Every time we start to hesitate, every time we recognize an internal twinge of discomfort based on *otherness*, we need to step up and shove through it, refusing to allow the fear of differences dictate our actions or reactions. It is up to us to recognize and immediately confront our fear of *otherness*.

Your Turn: *Think of a time when you allowed the fear of otherness to stop you from reaching out. What action could you have taken to push through that initial discomfort? Think about how you are going to intentionally confront that fear in the future.*

Dare of the Day: *Step out of your comfort zone. Eat lunch at a restaurant owned by someone from a different culture, or pick up dessert at an ethnic grocery store. Try to strike up a conversation with the servers or cashiers.*



The Risk of Rejection

Julie

If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Romans 8:31

My husband and I were having a whispered conference in the kitchen as our guests sat in our living room, patiently making small talk, all of us avoiding the question of the night: *Do we just go ahead and serve the food? Or do we wait longer, hoping they will show up?*

We were hosting a party in which a Somali connection had invited people from his community, and we had invited people from our community. It was our first clumsy attempt to reach across cultural divides within our city.

And it was an epic belly flop.

I still remember finally telling our guests to go ahead and eat, that there had been some misunderstanding and that no one from the Somali community would be joining us. Our guests were gracious and kind, and the awkwardness of the evening ebbed over good food and conversation.

The very next night, we packed our family up and attended an event hosted in part by the same Somali connection. We quietly supported his event and his community and were gracious about the miscommunication. I took my feelings of rejection to God alone, not allowing them to spill over into that tentative relationship.

My husband and I simply prayed and waited, asking God to open the next door instead of running ahead on our own. As spring rolled into summer, the soccer fields near our house filled every evening with young Somali men playing soccer. One night my husband put on his shin guards and wandered over with his ball and gear bag, seeking to engage the Somali community on their turf and in their comfort zones rather than inviting them into ours.

It's working. My husband and his friend, Kyle, play soccer a couple of evenings each week, bringing our children along to run and play nearby, allowing them to witness firsthand what it looks like to be neighbors who are unafraid to reach across differences to find common ground.

If we had pulled back at the first sting of rejection, we would have missed this new thing, this better thing quietly taking place on the soccer fields near our house.

Reaching out almost always means risking rejection. But risking rejection puts us into the places and spaces where God can most use us, and that's where I want to be.

Your Turn: Take your fears of rejection to Jesus in prayer today, asking for a new perspective on taking a risk.

Today's Dare: Extend that invitation you've been pondering but were afraid or nervous to extend.



Missed Opportunities

Kristin

You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully." 2 Corinthians 9:7

"Mom, we should pay for the people in the car behind us today!" my oldest daughter called out excitedly from the back of the vehicle.

"That's a great idea—but not today, ok?" I said, sighing a little. It was a hot day and we were waiting for the very best of summer treats from Dairy Queen. As the air conditioning blasted in my face and our youngest started to wail out of boredom from the lengthy wait, I tried to ignore the crying and counted down the minutes until I could taste the Chocolate Xtreme Blizzard on my tongue.

"Why not?" she persisted.

"Because it's not in the budget today," I explained, hoping she'd let it go. And she did.

It was only later that I regretted my words. Yes, we were having a tough year and needed to be cognizant of the budget—but had I missed a golden opportunity simply because I didn't want to be bothered? As a seven-year-old, most of the kind acts that occur to my daughter revolve around neighbors and friends rather than strangers. I found myself wishing I had encouraged her idea rather than dismissing it immediately.

What if I had made the hard choice instead of the easy one? I could have forgone my own treat in order to pay for someone else's. The girls and I could have gotten cones instead of Blizzards, cutting down on our cost in order to factor in the cost of someone else's order. What does it convey when my efforts to be kind are based solely on my comfort, my convenience, and my schedule? To my shame, I've realized that I simply can't expect to teach my children the value of sacrificial giving if I'm not willing to do it myself, even in small acts, like giving up my ice-cream choice.

I've come to realize that most often when I say no, like I did at Dairy Queen, it's not a money issue. It's a heart issue. Fortunately, I also know that there's grace when I unthinkingly take the easy road and there's always another chance to get it right.

Your turn: *Have you ever missed an opportunity to be kind and realized it later? How could you approach a similar situation differently next time?*

Dare of the Day: *Pray that God would bring you an opportunity to serve someone sacrificially—and that you won't miss it. Take the opportunity to show sacrificial kindness, whether that means sacrificing money, time, or comfort.*



Exercising Kindness

Kristin

Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Colossians 3:23

If you know me, you know I'm not big on exercise. I mean, I do it because it's good for my health, but the only marathons I envision involve things like shopping or coffee drinking.

It seems unlikely, then, that my first job out of high school would be working at a fitness studio, but that's where I found myself. At that time, these studios were all the rage: the machines were aligned in a circle around the perimeter of the room, and women moved from one machine to the next for a thirty-minute circuit routine.

Yet I was surprised to realize that when I went home at the end of the day, I was exhausted. Not, as you might think, from the amount of exercise I was doing—rather, from the amount of talking I was doing.

What I quickly learned was that many women wanted to chat to pass the time, so as the only employee present, I was the de facto conversationalist. At nineteen years old, I had no idea how to make small talk. I'm an introvert, more comfortable with books and solitude than chatting with strangers. And yet, as the job called for it, I quickly found myself developing those skills. As time went on, I came up with a short list of things to talk about: the weather, the women's children or grandchildren, their careers, their hobbies, their weekend plans, their vacations. The emphasis was on *them*, and for good reason: People are less likely to lose interest if they're talking about themselves.

Oftentimes, doing acts of kindness can feel like an undeveloped skill akin to making small talk. Showing intentional kindness can feel awkward at first—like an atrophied muscle we've never tried to exercise—until we've tried it a few times. Sometimes showing kindness can be spontaneous. But as a busy mom of three, more often than not, it's planned out. It's intentional. And that takes time and practice. For instance, I plan out purchasing items from the food shelf (and I factor that into my grocery budget). I plan out what sort of things I might say to the next homeless person I see to smooth over any awkwardness, and I have the items I intend to give him or her ready to go in my glovebox. During the Christmas season, I schedule acts of kindness on specific days, just like I do for parties and school recitals.

And just like my conversations at the exercise studio, the focus isn't on me. For Christ-followers, kindness is the perfect reminder that all the work and preparation we do isn't for us—or even for those who receive it—rather, it's for the glory of God.

Your turn: *Think of a time when you wanted to be kind but it felt awkward or you worried that you didn't have enough time to see it through to completion. In what ways can you "exercise" the kindness muscle through advanced planning and preparation?*

Dare of the Day: *Choose an act of kindness for today, and be intentional in how you see it through to completion.*



Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Julie

Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. 1 John 3:18

A note left unsent, a phone call not made, an intent to volunteer at the nursing home that never quite manifested into actually volunteering. I've done it. I do it. And the slightly nauseating reminder of the things I've failed to do hits me most often in the moments when I can do nothing to fix it: in the middle of the night, during a meeting, while I'm driving on a day that is already filled to the tippy top with obligations.

As I consider *that thing* I've suddenly remembered was left undone, the age-old cultural cliché rattles around in my head: the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Intending to do something is not the same as doing it, and thinking a nice thought is not the same as putting my faith into action. In fact, when I set aside time from my day to attend to the things God has laid on my heart, I find that I never run out of time for the rest of my to-do list. Somehow, it all gets done and with less scramble and chaos.

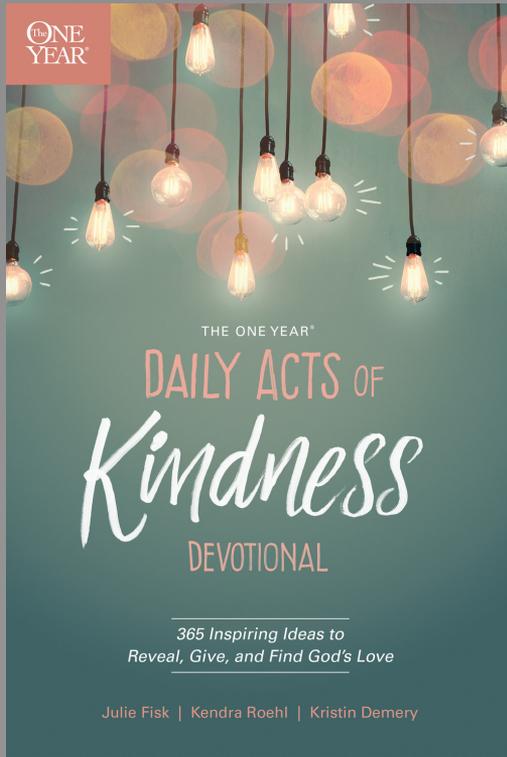
Making time to follow through on the things God has prompted us to do is an investment in ourselves and others that will yield unimagined dividends. And yet, these are often the things that we let fall to the wayside.

As I stop to ask forgiveness for my failure to follow through, I'm making a point to determine how to do better next time—making apologies when necessary without making excuses and finding ways to prevent myself from forgetting or procrastinating next time.

Your Turn: *Have you been neglecting the things God has prompted you to do, the thoughts you know you should put into action, the follow-ups you know you owe? Take time to seek forgiveness and formulate a schedule and a plan.*

Today's Dare: *Check one thing off your God to-do list, right now. Make the phone call, send the note, or follow up in whatever way you and God decide.*

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