



# NICE

WHY WE LOVE TO BE LIKED AND  
HOW GOD CALLS US TO MORE

Sharon Hodde Miller



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Sharon Hodde Miller, *Nice*  
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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Miller, Sharon Hodde, 1981- author.

Title: Nice : why we love to be liked and how God calls us to more / Sharon Hodde Miller.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2019002814 | ISBN 9780801075247 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Self-esteem—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Self-acceptance—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Fruit of the Spirit. | Social acceptance. | Integrity—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4598.24 .M55 2019 | DDC 248.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019002814>

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19 20 21 22 23 24 25      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To my Sadie girl.*

*You burst into our lives as I crafted these words  
about courage, character, and conviction.*

*I pray that, one day, you will grow into a woman who bears  
these good fruits, but my greatest hope for you is this:*

*That you would know how wildly you are loved  
by us and by your Father in heaven.*

*We are so glad you are here.*



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# INTRODUCTION

*God did not call you to be nice.*

This statement has been rattling around in my head for well over a year now, and I haven't been able to shake it. It has re-emerged at crucial moments, not as an excuse to be snarky, angry, or rude, but because I have noticed something going on in my heart, and in the church, for a while now: A competing allegiance. A warm and inviting idolatry that has managed to wedge itself between us and true obedience to Christ.

In my first book, *Free of Me*, I began the work of understanding this spiritual stronghold, which doesn't sound like a stronghold at all. In that book, I described my identity as a "nice Christian girl." For as long as I can remember, I have loved to be nice—not just loved but *needed*—and it is an identity I have struggled to leave behind. Even now, while writing this book, I have squirmed and deleted and rewritten and repeated because I was afraid of how my words would come across. I don't want to be scary or intimidating or unlikable. I want to be accepted, and I want to be embraced.

And so, to this day, my idol of choice is a very pretty one.

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I identify “niceness” as an idol in my life because I have served it tirelessly, and it has served me well in return. In our culture, niceness is not just a socially acceptable behavior but an openly encouraged one. The world gushes over nice Christians, and for obvious reasons. Nice Christians follow the rules. Nice Christian kids obey their parents. Nice Christian employees are dependable. Nice Christian neighbors aren’t too loud. Nice Christian students do their homework. And nice Christian church members always show up, always do what they are asked, and always do it with a smile.

The rewards are many for being nice. Parents love it. Grandparents praise it. Teachers reward it. Pastors celebrate it. And so, as a nice Christian girl, I settled into that identity comfortably. Throughout my childhood I played by the rules. I people-pleased. I made good grades. I went to church every week. “Nice Christian girl” was what I did, but it was also who I was. The highest priority in my heart, just a step above following Jesus, was my *reputation* as a girl who followed Jesus.

I probably wouldn’t have articulated it so shrewdly at the time, but on some level I understood that niceness *gets* you things. It earned me a lot of attention and positive affirmation, and because of this, it wasn’t long before my motives for being nice became extremely muddled. I was a nice kid, not simply for Jesus’s sake but also for my own.

Ever since I first wrote about this part of my childhood, I knew I wasn’t done with it. I knew this topic deserved more than a few paragraphs, because I can see its wide-ranging effects in my life. My devotion to niceness has won me a lot of acceptance and praise, but it has also inhibited my courage,

fed my self-righteousness, encouraged my inauthenticity, and produced in me a flimsy sweetness that easily gives way to disdain.

Once I noticed these yawning gaps in my spiritual growth, I knew I needed to dig deeper to understand their relationship to niceness, but I felt burdened to explore them for other reasons as well. In addition to noticing the stronghold of niceness in my life, I noticed it in others: The community shocked by their neighbor's secret life because she was "just so nice." The leader forgiven of his moral failure because he is incredibly nice. The family falling apart at the seams, while maintaining an image of "perfect niceness" online.

There was also the daily usefulness of niceness. It has become a social currency in our culture, one that we value highly without ever really realizing it. I once discussed this topic with Dr. Christina Edmondson, dean of intercultural student development at Calvin College and cohost of the podcast "Truth's Table," and she remarked that "we are wooed by superficial niceness. Satiated by it." We will forgive all manner of ills in a person we deem to be nice. We use niceness to grease the wheels of our social interactions. We employ niceness like a ladder, helping us to scale the heights of our career. We smuggle white lies inside the Trojan Horse of niceness for the sake of preserving relationships. And for many Christians, following Jesus means we are just really, *really* nice. All of this alerted me to the supreme value of niceness in our culture. Niceness is not merely a pleasant trait, it is a trump card. It has tremendous social power, so much so that it can overshadow virtually any vice.

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That was my second reason for returning to this topic. The third reason, the thing that convinced me niceness is not just a social skill but a competing priority in our lives, was watching how the world responds to people who stray outside the expectations of niceness, as if they have violated some holy, unspoken social contract. The friend who says a hard thing that we need to hear, the pastor who holds us accountable, the leader who disrupts the status quo—these not-nice behaviors are frequently met with swift rejection and even rage. Friendships end. Church members leave. Social media burns with outrage. These kinds of reactions tell us something about the role of niceness in our culture. Niceness, I realized, is not just a social expectation; it's a sacred cow.

Now let me take a second to make this clear. Christians are, without exception, called to kindness, gentleness, and love. I am not advocating for harshness, meanness, mudslinging, or name-calling that passes itself off as “courageous” or “bold.” Instead, I am talking about the price we pay when we stray outside the bounds of “pleasant” or “encouraging” to say something “timely” and “true.” Even when we are winsome, careful, and abounding in grace, there is a cost to speaking truth that isn't “nice.” Especially when that truth impinges on the culture's idols or the idols that are present in our own communities.

As a lifelong nice girl, I have not only felt this pressure but I have also caved in to it often. The need to be nice has influenced my ministry as well as my relationships. I have backed away from hard conversations or softened my convictions, opting instead for the wide gate of niceness.



But after doing this for years and observing the fruit of this false idol in my life, here is what I have concluded: I cannot follow Jesus and nice. Not equally. Because following Jesus means following a man who spoke hard and confusing truths, who was honest with his disciples—even when it hurt—who condemned the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and turned over tables in the temple. Jesus was a man who went face-to-face with the devil himself and died on a cross rather than succumb to the status quo. Jesus was loving. He was gracious. He was forgiving. He was kind. But he was not nice. He was a man who would leave the ninety-nine sheep to rescue the one, but he was also totally unafraid of offending people.

Jesus understood the difference between graciousness and personal compromise, between speaking truth and needlessly alienating people. Rather than wear a shiny veneer, he became the embodiment of rugged love.

This, not niceness, is what we are called to. But it's not quite as simple as that. We exist in a world that swings between sweetness and outrage, two behaviors that seem to be at odds with one another. In reality, they are two sides of the same coin: a lack of spiritual formation. When our civility isn't rooted in something sturdy and deep, when our good behavior isn't springing from the core of who we are but is instead merely a mask we put on, it is only a matter of time before the façade crumbles away and our true state is revealed: an entire generation of people who are really good at looking good.

The solution, then, is not to trade in our appearance of niceness for an appearance of boldness. We have to go deeper. We have to cultivate something entirely new.

## **The Fruit Is Bad**

In Matthew 7, Jesus uses an analogy I will draw on throughout this book. Describing false teachers, he warns:

You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, **every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.** A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. (vv. 16–20, emphasis added)

Although this passage refers to the specific context of false teaching, it derives from a universal principle—**bad trees produce bad fruit.** With this principle in mind, the first half of this book will identify the bad fruits of niceness. We are starting with the fruits instead of the root for the same reason Jesus did—it’s how we recognize the tree. This first section will not only identify unhealthy fruits you may have missed or simply denied but it will also serve as a personal health check. Call it a heart diagnosis. If you spot any of these fruits in your life, it could be a sign of your own excessive commitment to niceness.

Once we identify the bad fruits of niceness, we will spend the second half of the book looking at how to cultivate a better tree, including practical steps to guide your way and produce real and lasting change.



With all that’s going on in the world, niceness might seem like a minor problem. But this idol is only small in the way

that aphids are small. These insects cause mostly superficial damage by ingesting a plant's sap; however, they can cause serious, if not fatal, harm through the transmission of viruses that kill. Niceness is like that. Its immediate impact seems trivial—people-pleasing, brownnosing, pretending to like a present you hate—but when it becomes a habit of our lives and our faith, its fruit is bad and its long-term harvest is barren.

This particular problem—letting niceness become a habit—is what we are going to focus on. This means two things: First, this book is not a takedown of all niceness. Niceness is not wrong or inherently bad. My aim is not to villainize nice people or banish the word from our lexicon. Instead, niceness is like any good or neutral thing, which becomes a broken thing when it becomes an ultimate thing.<sup>1</sup> When we turn to niceness for peace in our relationships, promotions in our workplace, preference in our community, and power in our ministry, niceness is no longer a harmless social default but an alternative god whose promises compete with Christ.

What I want to do in these pages is consider how we have made niceness into an ultimate thing, how we use niceness to get what we want, what that is doing to our spiritual lives, and how it's undermining our credibility in the world.

Second—and I cannot say this enough—this book is not a defense of rudeness, anger, malice, meanness, or aggression. I am not advocating that we say whatever we feel and “let the chips fall where they may.” These are fruits of a different tree that also needs to be pruned.

Niceness is a characteristic that most of us love to use, but it can end up using us instead. It becomes a master we fear to

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defy, and as a result, it eventually stands between us and obedience. What each of us needs in place of the superficial virtue of niceness is a soul rooted and abiding in Christ. We need to be transformed so fully and completely that we actually are who we present ourselves to be. We need to cultivate a fruit that, instead of tasting worse than it looks, tastes even *better* than we could imagine.

To that end, each chapter will conclude with two practical steps: a passage of Scripture to meditate on or memorize and reflection questions. I have titled the first section “Taking Root,” because we root ourselves in the Word of God when we write his Scripture on our hearts. The second I have called “Digging Deeper,” because this is a dirt-under-your-fingernails endeavor.

So let’s roll up our sleeves and get to the work of pruning this habit from our lives and this idol from our hearts. Ecclesiastes 3:2 (NIV) says, “[There is] a time to plant and a time to uproot,” and I believe we need a season of uprooting. So here I am, raising an ax, and inviting you to join me.



# The Fruit of Niceness

Every year at the end of November, my husband, Ike, and I load the kids in the car and drive to the nearest Christmas tree lot. We are committed “real tree” people—not to be confused with “fake tree” people who keep their trees stored in a box—so the hunt for the perfect tree is one we anticipate and enjoy every year. No matter where we live or how busy we are, we set aside time to visit a farm or a store in order to make our pick. Ike, the kids, and I painstakingly inspect every single option, examine them for gaps, assess their sizes, and scan for brown spots. Then, after we have made our choice, Ike hoists the tree on top of our car, ties it down, and drives us home.

Once we get back to the house, we carefully mount the tree on the stand and carry it inside, trying to scatter as few needles as possible. For the rest of the night, the sap on our fingers attracts dirt, hair, fuzz, and other light debris. I don’t like the mess and I don’t like the hassle, but it’s a hassle we are happy to

endure. Nothing beats the smell of Fraser fir filling the air, and nothing transports Ike and me to our childhood Christmases quite like the glow of a fresh tree in our home.

At least, that is how it normally goes. Several years ago our Norman Rockwell moment was not to be. Ike and I bought a discount tree at a local store. That was probably our first mistake. The tree had several bald patches and multiple brown spots. The branches were dry and the needles prickly. We should have read the signs, but I was optimistic. I thought I could hide the gaps with some faux poinsettias and no one would be the wiser. So we took the tree home.

For the first few days, the tree was stunning. I loaded it with ornaments, ribbons, and pearls. It was shiny, full, and smelled like an evergreen forest. It was probably the most aromatic tree we've ever had. All was well except for one niggling concern: the tree wasn't taking any water.

If you have ever purchased a real tree, you know they guzzle water, especially at first, and especially after the lights have been weighing on their branches for a while. But not this one. Every time I checked the stand, the water level had barely dropped. That's when I suspected something wasn't quite right.

Not long after, the branches were drying out, and the needles became so thorny I flinched to brush against them. And the smell that I loved so much? Over time the scent of evergreen was replaced with a musty, rotten odor. That was when it became clear: our tree wasn't just a dud. Our tree was dead.

That was a disappointing year in the Miller home. We decided to keep the tree for those remaining days before Christmas, but whenever I passed by it, I was reminded of something

I had missed amid all the Christmases before. No matter how much you dress up a “real tree,” no matter how much you cover it in family heirlooms, silver bells, tinsel, and lights, a Christmas tree is still a dying tree.

And this, I realized, was a tree-shaped sermon about my life.

### **Good at Looking Good**

Christianity can be such a pretty faith. God calls us to wonderful things, to noble deeds, and to be a people of love. We are meant to be kind, joyful, brave, and good. These are attractive qualities that most people would love to be known for, Christian or not.

The trouble is, we can approach the Christian life in the same way we decorate a Christmas tree, by piling on pleasing spiritual adornments. We can dress up our lives with church commitments, community service, spiritual language, a clean-cut family, and an upbeat attitude. All of these things look so great—so *Christian*—while obscuring what is really going on underneath. Beneath all the spiritual glitz, we can exist cut off from our root system, without detection. We can appear to be thriving, even though we are disconnected from the vine.

Many of us are masters at this. We look great on the outside while withering on the inside. It’s easy to pull off this illusion because humans are a lot like the evergreen trees we display in our homes. We can maintain the appearance of flourishing long after we have uprooted our souls. My neighbor once tossed her Christmas tree into the woods in her backyard, and it was weeks before the tree showed any sign of decay. Weeks! The

human soul is like that. Our spiritual decay can take months, even years, to make itself known. We can conceal our dead spots for long periods of time, appearing healthy, vibrant, and thriving at the same time that we are dying.

But we can't hide the sickness forever. As radiant as my tree appeared, the decorations couldn't mask the smell. And neither can we. We can only maintain the illusion for so long before reality begins to poke through.

For many of us, that Christmas tree is our story. We look great, our church looks great, everything seems fine. Until the day we pull back the branches and discover the sickness hiding within. Underneath all the ministry commitments, the Christian conferences, the growing churches, the bestselling books, and the uplifting social media posts, there is fear. There is pride. There is a need to control. There is self-preservation in place of generosity. Defensiveness in place of humility. Silence in place of boldness. Shouting in place of listening. Cynicism in place of hope. We can hide all of these things behind the ornaments of nice Christianity, which allows them to exist undetected for years.

These ornaments do not simply mask the sickness, they contribute to it as well. The baubles that decorate brittle branches also weigh them down. The lights that obscure a tree's dehydration dry it out faster. Niceness does the same. Our need to be nice, our need to be liked, our commitment to the appearance of being a certain kind of Christian all become a burden that our increasingly weary souls must bear. Abiding in niceness instead of abiding in Christ wilts our souls at the same time it gives us the appearance of life.



So, how did we get here? What is it about being nice that we love so much? The word *nice* generally means “pleasant, agreeable, delightful,”<sup>1</sup> but for the purposes of this book, I want to define the idol of niceness very specifically. The idol of niceness refers to the ways we make ourselves pleasant, agreeable, acceptable, or likable **in order to get something**. We use niceness to achieve belonging or avoid conflict, but we also use it to amass influence and power. We use niceness to succeed in the workplace or to manage the way people perceive us. Niceness has incredible weight in our culture—both inside and outside the church—and although few of us would admit to using it so slickly (and we maybe haven’t been aware that we are until now), many of us do. Niceness motivates us, reassures us, and promises greater ease in our social interactions. It is also the reason our message is unconvincing and our witness limp. Niceness is a false form of spiritual formation that has crept into the church, seduced Jesus’s followers, and taken much of the power out of our lives. It is one of our generation’s favorite idols, and it is high past time to name it.

### **A Short History of Niceness**

I don’t think it is an overstatement to say that niceness has a hold on us, but in order to understand why that is, it helps to understand how it came to be.

Like many words, *nice* has meant different things at different times. Its meaning has evolved throughout the centuries, dating as far back as 1604 when the word *nice* was featured in the first dictionary of the English language, Robert Cawdrey’s *A Table*

*Alphabetically*. There it is defined as “‘slow and laysie,’ and its origins are deemed unequivocally French.”<sup>2</sup>

In her book *American Niceness*, author Carrie Tirado Bramen explains that early on, nice had a variety of meanings. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, nice was “an ambiguous term that could be either an insult or a compliment, referring to someone who was either ostentatiously or elegantly dressed.”<sup>3</sup> However, by the early 1800s, its meaning had shifted again to simply mean pleasing.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this positive definition, nice has also carried with it a connotation of *silence*. In her book *The Tyranny of Niceness*, psychologist Evelyn Sommers traces the word back to its Latin roots and shares this insight.

When we fail to express our thoughts and opinions or refuse to hear what others say . . . There is a shutting down—or silencing—of oneself or the other. In this way, silence, in some form or degree, is the essential characteristic of being nice.<sup>5</sup>

Without getting too abstract, I think this is a really fascinating way of describing niceness. **Niceness is not necessarily what you do** (being kind, showing love, acting generously) **but what you don't do** (not speaking your mind, not saying hard things, not challenging injustice). In short, nice is the social equivalent of wallpaper. It's dressing up the walls without providing any furniture to sit on.

Even so, our culture gives niceness a tremendous amount of weight. Almost illogically so. I can't imagine walking into a house and declaring, “The roof is leaking and the foundation is crumbling but the *wallpaper!* I'll take it!” And yet that

is the kind of priority we give to niceness. That is how greatly we value it in our social interactions and how we assess other people: Were they *nice*? And more specifically: Were they nice to *me*?

The prioritization of niceness takes two distinct forms: one in our broader culture and one in the church. In our broader culture, niceness is a **false virtue**, and in the church it is a **false idol**. Let's begin with the first.

### **False Virtue**

Going back to ancient times, *virtue* has traditionally referred to a particular moral good. In Plato's *Republic*, the philosopher names four classical virtues: wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice. These virtues are not merely about doing the right thing but the *why* behind it. Plato describes virtue as "the desire of things honorable,"<sup>6</sup> which means we are motivated by a greater good outside ourselves.

Niceness, on the other hand, aims small. Bramen describes niceness as a virtue of "surfaces rather than depths,"<sup>7</sup> while Philip Ryken, president of Wheaton College, calls it "a trivial virtue that is easy to fake."<sup>8</sup> Niceness is concerned with the appearance of goodness, not the reality of it. In fact, niceness doesn't tell us much about reality at all.

Unfortunately the deceptive nature of niceness hasn't stopped us from relying on it for information. Instead we depend on niceness to assess a person's character. For this reason, Bramen describes niceness as a "permanent get-out-of-jail-free card" that exempts people "from acknowledging the consequences of

their actions.”<sup>9</sup> In our culture, niceness covers over a multitude of sins.

On some level, we all know this about niceness, which is why theologian Miroslav Volf describes niceness as a “social lubricant.”<sup>10</sup> We commonly utilize niceness to navigate conflict and facilitate relationships, and we do this because niceness gets us what we want. Sommers writes,

We believe that being nice will ease the beginning of relationships, endear us to people, hold relationships together, prevent emotional pain for ourselves and others, cover up our flaws or unkind thoughts, mask our true motives, spare us from having to say things that are hard to say, and provide us with a peaceful existence.<sup>11</sup>

Sommers is highlighting something about niceness that I don’t want you to miss. We typically assume niceness is about a deep-seated need to be liked and gain approval. Sometimes that is true, but it’s only the tip of the iceberg. More broadly, we are nice because it is to our benefit to be. Niceness gets us something we want, whether that is approval, influence, power, inclusion, or closing a deal. Belonging is only one of many prizes we use niceness to win.

Niceness has the appearance of serving others but it exists primarily to serve ourselves, and that is why niceness is a *false virtue*. Both Plato and his contemporary, Aristotle, believed that virtue is oriented toward a bigger vision. It is tied to “humanity’s ultimate end or purpose.”<sup>12</sup> Christians would later adapt this view and direct it toward Christ, meaning that true Christian virtue points us, and others, to God.

Niceness only pretends to do this, but it can pretend rather convincingly. We can put on a good exterior “for Jesus,” but this is not the same as true virtue. Virtue is not about appearance but motivation. It’s not about how we look but who we are becoming. Unlike false virtue, true virtue can never be unmasked. It is what it appears to be, and this is what we should long for and pray for in ourselves. The false virtue of niceness only makes us into “whitewashed tombs” (Matt. 23:27), pristine on the outside but empty within.

## **False Idol**

In addition to being a false virtue, niceness is also a false idol. In order to better understand what that means, I want to explain idolatry in a slightly different way than you may have heard before.

Since the beginning of creation, humans have struggled to fully trust God. We have always had a backup, a Plan B in case God didn’t come through. At the first sign of delay, the first worry that God might not show up, we run to our backup plan for help, and that backup plan is called an idol.

The irony, of course, is that the backup plan is the true intention of your heart. It’s what you really trust to come through for you. It’s what you *actually* depend on to give you what you want, regardless of what you say. Thousands of years ago, these backup plans took the form of alternative religions. If your crops needed rain, you turned to the god of rain for help. If you needed to win a battle, you turned to the god of war. If you wanted to have children, you turned to the goddess of fertility.

In the centuries since, our backups have changed but human nature has not. Our idols have shifted away from mythical characters and evolved into full-blown lifestyles. Financial security, professional success, academic performance, physical appearance—each one offers itself as an appealing backup plan for attaining peace, provision, and joy, just in case God doesn't come through with it himself.

Niceness offers itself as an attractive backup plan. It promises conflict-free relationships, acceptance, praise, and influence. These are rewards that honesty, transparency, and obedience to God do not guarantee. And so, when it comes to marriage, friendship, and social networking, niceness becomes our provider of choice.

However, Christians sometimes take this a step further. As I mentioned earlier, when I was growing up “niceness” became a part of my faith. I assumed that being a good Christian meant being a nice, likable person, so I conflated the two. I strove to be liked, whether it pointed people to Jesus or not. I made the mistake that author Randy Alcorn describes this way: “We’ve been schooled that it’s inappropriate to say anything negative. Being a good witness once meant faithfully representing Christ, even when it meant being unpopular. Now it means ‘making people like us.’ We’ve redefined *Christlike* to mean ‘nice.’”<sup>13</sup>

Not surprisingly, this false idol has shaped the reputation of Christians throughout the world. Alcorn explains, “Many non-believers know only two kinds of Christians: those who speak truth without grace and those who are very nice but never share the truth.”<sup>14</sup>

In my own life, I noticed myself sliding toward the latter. When confronted with hypocrisy or injustice among fellow Christians, I hemmed and hawed over whether to speak up. What if people got mad? What if people called me names? What if people questioned my motives? Similarly, I was timid with friends who were making destructive decisions. My need to be liked undermined the value of speaking truth and, ultimately, loving them.

And so, too often I went with my backup plan. I selected the option that caused the least amount of waves, the option that didn't require hard conversations and didn't risk any loss. I followed a version of Christianity that actually led me further from Christ.

## **The Two Aims of Niceness**

Because niceness is both a false virtue in the world and a false idol in the church, it shapes our lives in two distinct yet overlapping ways: the desire to be a nice *person* and the desire to be a nice *Christian*. The desire to be a nice person is nearly universal. Regardless of faith, most of us yearn to be accepted and liked, and this desire produces a variety of fruits in our lives, which we will explore in the following chapters. These fruits look healthy and sweet on the outside, but inside they have spoiled. When you take a bite into these fruits and really taste them, you discover the **fake** fruit of inauthenticity, the **rotten** fruit of corruption, the **bitter** fruit of cynicism, and the **bland** fruit of cowardice.

In addition to those four fruits, there is a religious form of niceness that is focused on being a nice Christian. Its two fruits are a little more specific than the others, because they are oriented toward being a nice *Christian*. Like the other fruits, these look good on the outside, but when you bite into them, you discover the **hard** fruit of self-righteousness and the **processed** fruit of sentimentality.

I hope the following chapters will feel a bit like pulling back the branches, peering behind the ornaments, and assessing the health of your tree. And I hope what you discover will instill in you a holy urgency. Not guilt but gumption, because this matters. Our spiritual health and our spiritual fruit *matter*. It's how people know who we are, but more importantly, it's how people know who we follow.

~~~~~ TAKING ROOT ~~~~~

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. (John 15:5 NASB)

~~~~~ DIGGING DEEPER ~~~~~

1. What did you learn about niceness that you never knew or had never thought about before?
2. Looking at your own life, in what ways have you used niceness to get things?



*The Fruit of Niceness*

3. In what ways have you seen niceness take the form of a false virtue in the world?
4. In what ways have you seen niceness take the form of a false idol in the church?