

"Respect"

[First in a series: "Living in the Kingdom: Values that Matter"]

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Romans 12:8-10, Philippians 2:1-8

When you heard the word "respect," what do you think of? Maybe it is Aretha Franklin singin'

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Find out what it means to me.

I think of the comedian Rodney Dangerfield, who never did get respect. He was famous for his one-liners:

"I tell ya I get no respect from anyone. I bought a cemetery plot. The guy said, "There goes the neighborhood!"

"I could tell that my parents hated me. My bath toys were a toaster and a radio."

I tell ya when I was a kid, all I knew was rejection. My yo-yo, it never came back!

"I remember I was so depressed I was going to jump out a window on the tenth floor, so they sent a priest to talk to me. He said, "On your mark. ..."

"My wife made me join a bridge club. I jump off next Tuesday."

My psychiatrist told me I'm going crazy. I told him, "If you don't mind, I'd like a second opinion." He said, "All right. You're ugly too!"

Poor Rodney, all he wanted is what everyone desires – a little respect. And yet, there does appear to a shortage of that virtue in our society today. There is a coarseness, a lack of civility, a basic rudeness that appears to be growing. We saw it the other night in Kanye West so rudely taking the limelight away from Taylor Swift at the MTV awards. We saw it in Congressman Wilson's "you lie" outburst during the president's speech. We saw it in Serena William's obscenity-laced tongue lashing of a line judge at the U.S. Open tennis match. We see it in the loud, rancorous political battles of our day. Whatever ever happened to respect?

A recent survey funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, took a detailed look at what Americans are thinking about courtesy, manners, rudeness and respect. According to the study, 8 in 10 Americans believe a lack of respect and courtesy is a serious problem, and six in 10 say things have become worse in recent years.

While most people acknowledge that Americans' behavior has improved in some areas, such as the treatment of racial and ethnic minorities and the disabled, in many others areas, Americans say they are witnessing a deterioration of courtesy and respectfulness that has become a daily assault on their sensibilities and the quality of their lives. Majorities of Americans complain about inconsiderate, even

dangerous drivers; rude cell phone users; and a virtually ubiquitous onslaught of profanity and coarse language.

Americans say that the way they are treated by business and customer service employees is frequently exasperating, and sometimes even insulting. Too many workers, they complain, are careless, apathetic and unhelpful. Almost half of those surveyed say that they have walked out of a business specifically because of bad service.

When asked why they thought rudeness and the lack of respect was rising, they cited the pressures of fast-pace living and crowded conditions in the cities. Other explanations point to the times we live in and the values we live by - a declining sense of community, offensive and amoral entertainment media and an overall rise in selfishness and callousness.

Do you remember how it was in the days after 9-11? It was amazing how that traumatic event brought the whole country together. People for a time truly were more caring and thoughtful. Hearts were softened. People hugged more, they held hands more often, they were not as rude, not as selfish – there was a feeling of human togetherness. People who normally wouldn't talk to one another on the city streets all of a sudden began to open up and began to commiserate, recognizing their common humanity – office managers actually noticed and talked to people who lived on the streets. All across the country there was an enhanced appreciation of the value of human life, because so much precious life was taken, and taken so cruelly and abruptly. We caught a glimpse of what life could be. Unfortunately, the feeling didn't last. Respect is once again in short supply.

In any case, Christians – those who are citizens of God's kingdom – those who are under the gracious rule of God – are called to live differently. Indeed, we are to model respect for others after the example of Jesus Christ, who valued every human being. We are especially to model that virtue in our relationships with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. *"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love,"* says the Apostle Paul. *"Honor one another above yourselves . . . in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus . . ."*

Respect is the affirmation of the inherent dignity, the sacred worth of every human being. Respect is the acknowledgement that every person is an unrepeatable miracle, a cherished creation of God, and is therefore to be treated with great honor and reverence.

Dr. Gary Smalley, a counselor, popular speaker and author, illustrated the virtue of respect in a memorable way. He was addressing a crowd on the theme of love and marriage, and he began his talk by walking over to a table and picking up an old, beaten up violin. The instrument's bridge was broken and dangling by its strings. Holding up the violin for all to see, he asked the audience what he thought the instrument was worth. Everyone laughed, and most thought no more than ten or twenty bucks. Then Smalley looked inside the body of the violin and read an inscription inside: "1723 Antonin Stradivarius." There was an audible gasp, as the crowd recognized just how valuable it was. (Probably \$100,000 at the time).

Smalley passed it around to the people in the front row and they handled it very gently, with great respect.

The amazing thing is that moments before, people thought it was just a piece of junk. Nothing changed – it was the same violin, the same wood, and the same broken strings. But people chose to honor it as the rare treasure it was.

Which is to say, that people can choose to treat other people like a piece of junk (as they often do), writing them off as if they had no value, or they can choose to treat other people like a Stradivarius, with profound honor and respect, realizing that the people they live with and work with bear the imprint and image of their Maker.

What a difference would it make in our day to think of each person we meet like a Stradivarius – an absolute treasure - and therefore to be handled with extreme care? What difference would it make in our marriage, if, instead of taking our spouse for granted, we treated them always with profound respect? What difference would it make in our friendships, our association with colleagues and classmates – to honor them, even above ourselves?

The medieval rabbis used to say that if we could only see, each person is preceded by legions of angels singing *"Make way for the image of God."*

You and I will grow in our capacity to show honor and respect for others when we realize that the people we meet with and deal with every day are people of incredible value and worth, for they are created in the very image of God; they bear his very imprint.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, all we have to do is look to the example of our Lord. Jesus treated every human being as a precious treasure. He had time for people whom everyone else had written off. He cared for widows and orphans. He reached out to the poor and the downtrodden, to the outcasts and sinners, the sick and the ostracized. He even honored and respected his enemies, valuing them so much that he was willing to go the cross for them, forgiving them and dying for them.

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus . . .
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient unto death –
even death on a cross^d*

Perhaps someone would be willing to give his life to save "good" people – but to save one's enemies? *"It is while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

"Let your attitude be the same as Christ Jesus" admonishes Paul. Just as the Lord put the needs of others above his own, just as he treated everyone with profound respect and even reverence, so too, must we, who are called to carry on his work and to model what life is like when people submit to God's gracious rule.

The fact of the matter is that you and I should value what God values, and nothing is more precious to him than human life.

Many of you have seen the movie *Schindler's List* – the true story of Oscar Schindler, a Czech businessman and Nazi party member who tried to make his fortune during the Second World War by exploiting cheap Jewish labor, but who ended up penniless having saved over 1100 Polish Jews from almost certain death during the holocaust. At the end of the movie, Schindler receives a gift from those he saved – a ring made from gold fillings extracted from one of the grateful Jews. The ring was inscribed with the Talmudic verse: *"He who saves one life, it is as if he saved the entire world."*

Such is the value of one human life! Schindler lamented – if only he could have saved just one more! The entire quote from the Jewish Talmud reads: *"In the beginning, God created only one person in order to teach us the lesson that if you destroy a single person it is as if you have destroyed the whole world. And, the Scripture reminds us, if you save the life of a single person, it is as if you have saved the whole world."*

Every life is sacred; every life is infinitely precious. Every person is a whole world of experience and love unto himself or herself. Each life is valued and esteemed by God, for he created them, and he died for them. And many of these folks whom we have trouble loving are people we are going to have to live with in heaven - *eternally*. We better start loving them now!

Og Mandino gives wise counsel: *"Beginning today, treat everyone you meet as if they were going to be dead by midnight. Extend to them all the care, kindness and understanding you can muster, and do it with no thought of any reward. Your life will never be the same again."*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the people we live with and work with are infinitely precious to God. They are treasured by him and bear his very imprint. Caution: Handle with extreme care!

Let our attitude be like that of Christ Jesus. Amen!