

## CHAPTER 33

# Respect and Tolerance

### Respect

As we grow up, we want to be loved by our parents, but we also long for their respect and to be accorded the dignity that we think we deserve. What does it mean to respect a person? Respect is showing regard for the worth of someone or something. It takes three main forms.

- ✗ Respect for oneself
- ✗ Respect for others
- ✗ Respect for all forms of life and the environment that sustains them

Showing respect for oneself requires one to treat one's own life — its spiritual and physical dimensions — as having inherent value. That's why it is wrong to engage in self-destructive behavior such as drug or alcohol abuse. In fact, if one doesn't respect and love oneself, it is very hard to respect and love others. This is why Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Respecting others requires that we treat all other human beings — even those whom we dislike — as having dignity and rights equal to our own. That is the heart of the Golden Rule — "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Goethe said that there is no outward sign of true courtesy that does not rest on a deep moral foundation. Respect for property comes from an understanding that property is an extension of a person or a community.

Respect for the whole complex web of life prohibits cruelty to animals and calls us to act with care toward the natural environment, the fragile ecosystem on which all life depends. It includes respect for inanimate things too.

Respect is shown by the way we behave. This is why most parents are concerned with teaching their children how to behave well, how to have good manners, and how to treat people respectfully.

Courtesy and good manners enable people to get along with each other and resolve problems in a way that is



## Etiquette in a nutshell

- Never break an engagement when one is made, whether of a business or social nature. If you are compelled to do so, make an immediate apology either by note or in person.
- Be punctual as to time, precise as to payment, honest and thoughtful in all your transactions, whether with rich or poor.
- Never look over the shoulder of one who is reading, or intrude yourself into a conversation in which you are not invited or expected to take part.
- Tell the truth at all times and in all places. It is better to have a reputation for truthfulness than one for wit, wisdom, or brilliancy.
- Avoid making personal comments regarding a person's dress, manners, or habits. Be sure you are all right in these respects, and you will find you have quite enough to attend to.
- Always be thoughtful regarding the comfort and pleasure of others. Give the best seat in your room to a lady, an aged person, or an invalid.
- Ask no questions about the affairs of your friend unless he wants your advice. Then he will tell you all he desires to have you know.
- A true lady or gentleman, one who is worthy of the name, will never disparage one of the other sex by word or deed.
- Always remember that a book that has been loaned to you is not yours to loan to another.
- Mention your wife or husband with the greatest respect, even in your most familiar references.
- If you have calls to make, see that you attend to them punctually. Your friends may reasonably think you slight them when you fail to do so.
- If wine or liquors are used on your table or in your presence, never urge others to use them against their own inclinations.

acceptable and dignified. To the left is an excerpt from a late nineteenth-century book entitled *Correct Manners, A Complete Handbook of Etiquette*. Can you add to the list?

We learn respect in the family, both from the way we are treated by our parents and from the way we see them treating others. Words spoken outside the home are often learned in the home. Our parents teach us to respect things: not to break things or touch things that belong to someone else. They teach us not to hit our siblings and to be polite to visitors. We learn that there is a proper way to behave. If we are rude, we can expect to be reprimanded by our parents and elders. When we show disrespect to another person, we are saying to him, "You are not valuable. Your thoughts and feelings are of little importance. You do not count for much." For the same reason, when someone is rude to us, we feel offended.

Respect, then, depends on the recognition that we are part of a common human heritage and are all worthy of the same regard. Each person has a unique value and should never be treated as a means to achieve some end. Despite the different backgrounds,

languages or family traditions we may have, we must respect each other, even when we do not like or agree with the other person. We should strive to treat other people the way we would like to be treated.

## Tolerance

If we feel very deeply about something, it may be difficult to respect a person who thinks differently. We believe that we are right and that our way is the only right way. In this case we may regard a person as an enemy, not because he has done anything to us personally but just because his truth is not the same as ours. Even more, we may believe that his truth is false and dangerous. This is why religious people have fought and even killed each other. On both sides of such conflicts, one could find sincere and moral people who nevertheless could not tolerate each other. However, in many countries a tradition of religious tolerance has developed and people are no longer discriminated against or punished for what they believe. Society is much richer when we tolerate people's eccentricities and differing opinions. Still, there are limits to tolerance. We should not tolerate injustice, evil, corruption, lies, or bad behavior. These are all expressions of a lack of respect.

There is a Christian saying that one must "love the sinner but hate the sin." If a person does something wrong, he or she should be corrected and punished if necessary. But at the same time the person should be treated with respect. Even a criminal has a right to the basic respect due to him as a human being, even if he is to be punished for his crimes.

## Empathy

One of the ways that we can develop and deepen our respect for other people is through empathy. When we empathize with a person, we feel the way he feels and think the way he thinks. We don't necessarily sympathize or agree with him, but we try to understand him, to see the world through his eyes. It is easy to judge and criticize other people without understanding them. But there is a wise American Indian saying: "Do not judge another person until you have walked a mile in his moccasins."

Learning to empathize is not easy, especially if we don't also sympathize with a person. It is a valuable and important skill but one that is not easily acquired. Here are some questions a person may ask himself in order to more closely understand another person's situation. (This applies to all situations, including trying to understand a friend or a parent when in a disagreement.)

One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts.

— African proverb

- ✗ How does this person feel?
- ✗ How would I feel if I were that person?
- ✗ How would I want other people to act if I were that person?

Empathy leads to understanding and compassion. When we seek to understand and appreciate differences, we can avoid destructive conflict and disunity.

If all people desire respect, then what does respecting others involve? To answer that question we can ask, "How do I want to be treated?"

- ✗ I want to be treated as valuable in myself, not simply to be used by other people.
- ✗ I want to be treated with care, not violence.
- ✗ I want to be accepted as an individual, not as just a member of a certain group or category of persons.

Something to think about



What is it about human differences that can bring new insights, new discoveries, new experiences and higher understanding?

In 1959 John Howard Griffin, a white American journalist, deeply concerned with the mistreatment of black Americans, took medication that temporarily turned his skin dark brown. He did this in order to pose as a black man and submerge himself in the black American community. He thought that the only way he could understand the dynamics of the racial struggle objectively was by living in "both worlds." He wrote about his experiences in a bestselling book, *Black Like Me*, which was published in 1960. The following is a short excerpt from the book:

In the bus station lobby, I looked for signs indicating a colored waiting room, but saw none. I walked up to the ticket counter. When the lady ticket-seller saw me, her otherwise attractive face turned sour, violently so. This look was so unexpected and so unprovoked I was taken aback.

"What do you want?" she snapped. Taking care to pitch my voice to politeness, I asked about the next bus to Hattiesburg. She answered rudely and glared at me with such loathing I knew I was receiving what was called the "hate stare." It was my first experience with it. It is far more than the look of disapproval one occasionally gets. This was so exaggeratedly hateful I would have been amused if I was not so surprised. I framed the words in my mind:

"Pardon me, but have I done something to offend you?" But I realized that I had done nothing — my color offended her. "I'll take a one-way ticket to Hattiesburg, please," I said and placed a ten dollar bill on the counter.

"I can't change that big a bill," she said abruptly and turned away, as though the matter were closed. I remained at the window, feeling strangely abandoned but not knowing what else to do. In a while she flew back at me, her face flushed, and nearly shouted:

"I told you — I can't change that big a bill."

"Surely," I said stiffly, "in the entire system there must be some means of changing a ten dollar bill. Perhaps the manager ... "

She jerked the bill furiously from my hand and stepped away from the window. In a moment she reappeared to hurl my change at the counter with such force most of it fell on the floor at my feet. I was truly dumbfounded by this deep fury that possessed her whenever she looked at me. Her performance was so venomous, I felt sorry for her. It must have shown in my expression, for her face congested a high pink. She undoubtedly considered it a supreme insolence for a Negro to dare to feel sorry for her. I was the same man, whether white or black. Yet when I was white, I received the brotherly love, smiles and privileges from whites and the hate stares or obsequiousness from the Negroes. And when I was a Negro, the whites judged me fit for the junk heap, while the Negroes treated me with great warmth.

This story illustrates that empathy is related to respecting others as individuals. The journalist was able to empathize with the Negroes, while the white ticket-seller could not. The problem was that she was not treating him as an individual but as a "black man." It was the stereotype that she had of black people that made her treat him so badly. We all have stereotypes and prejudices that prevent us from even starting to know other people as individuals. Let us take a look at this problem.



## Generalizations

The first time we meet someone from a particular school, town, or country is important. The impression we have of that person (and he of us) will probably lead to the formation of a general picture of what such people are like. This is why it is so important to behave sensitively when you go abroad yourself. When people meet you, whether you like it or not, they meet you as a representative of your country and judge it accordingly. If we have a bad experience with a person from a particular country, we will probably assume that everyone is like him. Later, however, when we meet others from his country, we may discover that the first person was not a good representative, and we will modify our general picture accordingly. This is the way that we form pictures of what people of certain groups are like.

It is not possible to examine everything and everybody in the world individually. We naturally make generalizations, which serve as rough guides as to what to expect from particular things or people. This helps us to make decisions more quickly. For example, the generalization that bulls are dangerous may not apply to every individual bull. However, when in the same field as a bull it is wiser to be cautious than to test the validity of the generalization for oneself — unless, of course, one aspires to become a bullfighter. Of course, for anyone to make good decisions, his generalizations should be as accurate as possible.

It is interesting to see how such generalizations develop and change. Forty years ago, cars manufactured in Japan were made from recycled steel and were often of poor quality. As a result, they had a poor reputation. Sensible people took this into consideration when deciding whether or not to buy a Japanese car. However, as the years went by, the quality of Japanese goods improved until today they have a very good reputation for quality and price. The importance of reputation is the reason that many businesses spend a lot of money on building up and maintaining a “brand image” based on quality.

## Stereotypes

Stereotypes of people work in a similar way. Many people have a set of assumptions and expectations about what people of the opposite sex are like, or what people of a particular race or nationality are like. Whenever they meet such a person, they



have a certain image of what to expect in terms of behavior. If these expectations are correct, it helps a person to respond and relate to the person successfully. It also means that one will not be surprised by any idiosyncrasies. This is very wise. If a certain group of people develop the reputation for being dishonest, then one is less likely to be deceived by them. In the same way, one would be more likely to unreservedly trust a person who is a member of a group with the reputation for honesty. Such knowledge, if it is accurate, is very valuable. Businessmen, diplomats, and tourists usually spend some time studying the national character of a new country they are going to visit so they will know what to expect. A person who traveled around the world expecting everyone to be honest would be very naive, and a person who expected everyone to be dishonest would miss many chances of making wonderful friends.

The problem is that often these generalizations become stereotypes — oversimplified and rigid images which are often distorted and exaggerated. There is usually a grain of truth — but only a grain — in them, because otherwise they wouldn't have developed. Stereotypes rob a person of the ability to function fully in the world because they provide only a very distorted view of reality. Dependence on stereotypes is the result of intellectual laziness. A person who cannot be bothered to learn the facts for himself just adopts the secondhand opinions of other people without checking them.

Stereotypes can sometimes be favorable (“All Englishmen are gentlemen”), sometimes amusing (“Scotsmen have deep pockets and short arms”), but can also be malicious (“Jews are liars”). They may be deliberately distorted due to a sense of racial or national superiority or simply because of ignorance. They often arise out of a fear of the unknown and a dislike of what is different. One group, to prove to itself its own superiority and to justify its dislike of another group, may create stereotypes that portray the other group as being subhuman. In such cases, people refuse to acknowledge evidence that doesn't fit into the stereotype they have of a particular group. People who refuse to conform to the stereotype may be hated even more than those who do.

## Prejudice

Such stereotypes can lead to prejudice — a judgment or an opinion that is made before the facts are known. Because of prejudice, a person is judged guilty not because of the facts of his situation but because of who he is. This attitude has time and again resulted in the inhumane treatment of people. We already looked at how anti-Semitism led to the Holocaust, but there have been many other similar tragedies: the extermination of the *kulaks* in Ukraine in the 1930s, the slave trade, the treatment by the British of the Aborigines in Australia and Tasmania, and the recent tribal slaughter in Burundi and Rwanda.

Stereotypes are usually passed on in the family from parents to children. They may have no rational basis but are charged with emotion. They are also often transmitted through the media and inflated by politicians trying to curry favor by attacking an unpopular minority. Stereotypes also are spread through racial and ethnic jokes and slurs. Persons who engage in such verbal abuse tell themselves that what they are saying is all right because there is no one from that group present to hear or be hurt by it. But in speaking in this way, and by listening to and laughing at such jokes, a poisonous atmosphere of disrespect and intolerance toward members of a certain group is created and spread.

As long as you keep a person down,  
some part of you has to be down  
there to hold him down, so it means  
you cannot soar as you otherwise  
might.

— Marian Anderson  
*African-American singer*

Since stereotypes are a distorted view of reality, they are harmful both to the person who holds them (since he cannot make informed decisions) and to the person or group that they are about (since they may be subject to abuse). It behooves every person to examine the opinions and prejudices inherited from his or her parents and society and determine how accurate they are. We should be constantly on guard against absorbing new stereotypes about new groups of people.

## Something to think about



- How do you think the author of *Black Like Me* felt, being treated so differently as a black man and a white man?
- Do you think he still had the same thoughts, values and desires, even though he had changed the color of his skin?
- What does this excerpt say about the way some people judge others?
- What stereotypes and prejudices do you have?

## For Your Journal



- Why should we respect all people and not just those we feel are “deserving” of our respect?
- Think about a group of people about whom you hold negative beliefs and feelings. List those beliefs and feelings, and indicate which are facts and which are opinions. Then try to remember where you learned all of these things. Are your beliefs based in truth? Where did your ideas about this group come from? Are these ideas that you want to pass on to others? Why or why not? No single person or group of people is completely evil. What good points do you see in this group of people?

# The Prophet

by Mikhail Lermontov

Since the eternal Judge gave me a prophet's omniscience,  
I have been reading the pages of evil and vice in people's hearts.

I began to proclaim the pure teachings of love and truth,  
but my neighbors threw stones at me.

I poured ashes on my head and fled from the cities;  
now I live in the desert like the birds, on God's food.

Keeping God's commandment, all the creatures obey me there, and  
stars listen to me, sparkling in the sky.

But when I am hurrying through a noisy city,  
old men say to the children, smiling contemptuously:

"Look, there is an example for you! He was too proud to live with us.  
He tried to persuade us that God was speaking through him.

Look at him, children, how dull, thin and pale he is,  
how poor he is and how everybody despises him!"