THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPECT

INTRODUCTION

Ever since Aretha Franklin released the iconic Motown hit that helped us all spell R-E-S-P-E-C-T, the desire to be respected jumped to the top of the charts in our culture and still remains there. Certainly she was not the cause, but her song was a symptom of the *me-centered* revolution — a revolution that swept over the United States in the late 20th century. The banner **Looking Out for Number One** unfurled over every realm of culture and retooled how people think morally, live relationally, and vote politically. No greater damage to character development has ever occurred, in my estimation.

COMMENTARY: THE IMPORTANCE OF RESPECT

A simple online survey of many of the popular quotes about respect reveals that it has a new orientation: the priority is on expecting—even demanding— that other people should respect you more than you respecting others.

Here's a few samples coming from well-known people whose names I won't reveal, but suffice it to say, they are definitely social influencers.

- "I respect myself and insist upon it from everybody. And because I do it, I then respect everybody too."
- "I only respect people who respect me, and I forget people who forget me."
- "Demand respect; from yourself first."
- "Never allow someone to be your priority while allowing yourself to be their option."

Probably we each would consider these statements as coming from a "worldly mindset." But this mindset has found a Trojan Horse for infiltrating the Christian mind in the way too many people interpret and apply the second half of what Jesus considered the greatest commandment: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

In Christian circles you will often hear this counsel: *You can't love others until you love yourself.* That sounds good only because our ears have grown accustomed to worldly wisdom, and it continues to reinforce the "self-first" perspective, which is culturally pervasive but patently not biblical.

The Bible's perspective is always paradoxical: lose your self to find your self. Choose to be last in order to be first. So in order to be more like Jesus, our whole orientation must be others first, even when we aren't getting what we think and probably do deserve. Like respect.

So let's look first at my definition for respect and then we'll break it down into four parts.

> **RESPECT IS…believing in and looking for the value of every person and treating them accordingly.**

Part One: **The Value of Every Person.** The heart of respect embedded in the center of the definition assumes that every person has inherent value that makes them deserving of a basic level of respect. The "inherent value" of every person no matter how far from God, from decency, from any meaningful contribution to society. We all nod our heads in agreement.

Part Two: **Believing in the Value of Every Person.** It's one thing to acknowledge the inherent value of all people. It's another to believe in it. The difference between acknowledging something and believing in something is like the difference between knowing parachutes work and actually jumping out of the plane with one on. This is what you have to be willing to do: leap into respectful behavior even when you don't feel like doing it.

Part Three: **Looking for the Value of Every Person.** As I said, the starting point for respect is believing in the inherent value of every person. But true respect moves beyond that basic point, assuming that each person has particular elements of value that bring added value into the world. Those particular elements may involve their position (like their age), their role (like a teacher), their abilities (like a musician), their accomplishments (like an inventor), their influence (like a philanthropist), their character (like a reliable worker.) You respect a person for these reasons, even if you don't like them or respect them in other ways.

Admittedly, there are often times when you have to look hard to notice the added value of another person. But the trait of respect looks hard to find something unique in every person. This does not come easily because it does not come naturally. We tend to treat people whose behavior is disagreeable with disdain. We have a visceral reaction that beats our mind to the punch. We feel turned off before our mind turns on.

It takes determination to fight the visceral reaction and look for a way to still show respect. You will undoubtedly ask, "Can I really find any reason to respect *that* person?!" But that's what the character trait of respect is able to do. But respect doesn't stop with just looking for and finding a reason. That's why the fourth part of the definition says…

Part Four: **And Treating Them Accordingly.** Ultimately there is no such thing as respect without respectful behavior. Unfortunately social norms have changed drastically over the last half century, leaving behind many standard practices of respect that once were afforded to all people, as well as personal property. That's why it's necessary, particularly as a follower of Jesus, to rediscover and retrain yourself in the habits of respect.

The Bible lays out the expectations that respect is an obligation. Most frequently it talks about respect for those who are older or in authority over you:

> **Lev 19:3 " 'Each of you must respect his mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the LORD your God.**
>
> **Lev. 19:32 Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD.**
>
> **1 Tim 6:1-2 All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered.**
>
> **1 Peter 2:17 Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.**
>
> **18 Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.**

But the loss of respectful behavior not only applies to people, especially those in authority over us, but it also applies to the property of others and especially property that for one reason or another is due attention, protection and preservation.

- You don't litter.
- You don't deface property.
- You don't wear a hat while praying or singing the National Anthem.
- You don't put your feet on the table.
- You don't let the flag touch the ground.

- You don't interrupt two people talking.
- You don't cut in line.
- You hold the door open to let the other person in first.

So many rules of respect have gone by the wayside in the last couple generations And even though people can give reasons why those rules may be merely superficial forms of respect, they still played a big part in training people to be respectful.

But the ways of Jesus set a much higher standard. He was always showing special attention and even affection for people whom others detested. Like Zacchaeus.

REFLECTION:

You remember the story probably… Zacchaeus was a hated tax-collector, who like all tax-collectors in his day extorted money from people. One day when Jesus was coming into town and a huge crowd had gathered, Zacchaeus also wanted to see Jesus. But he couldn't see over the crowd because he was short. So he climbed a tree to get a better look. Jesus saw him there, invited Himself to Zacchaeus home for dinner, and the rest of the story of Zacchaeus' salvation is history—wonderful history.

But have you ever wondered why Zacchaeus had to climb a tree to see Jesus? Yes, he was short. But that's not the only reason. When I was a young boy and in a crowd, like watching parade, being short and small was no problem. Small people can always squeeze through gaps between taller people and get to the front. If Zacchaeus couldn't do squeeze through, it had to have been because the crowd, who despised him, engaged in a silent conspiracy of ostracism. All they had to do if they felt him trying to squeeze through was just slightly close ranks to shut him out.

But Jesus counteracted the crowds disrespect and ill-will toward Zacchaeus with a bold show of respect, a bold show that led to the remarkable transformative salvation. Just one act of surprise respect did that.

That's what good character can often do. Whether it is showing respect or humility or generosity… or any of the traits we are learning are so much a part of being Christlike. And so much of whether we take on those traits is up to us.

So just two questions today.

- ***Are you rigorously, consistently and carefully treating people the way you want to be treated with regard to respect?***
- ***Can you identify and then confess any lack of respectful treatment of any person or group of persons?***

Remember the definition. It's not just believing in the value of all people. Nor does it stop with looking for the value of all people. But it is treating them accordingly. If you have been honest, you will probably find it important and helpful to pray today's prayer along with me.

PRAYER:

Dear Lord, until I went through this devotional today, I would have said I am a respectful person. But now I'm not so sure. It's easy to notice when I'm being respectful, but much harder to notice when I'm not. When I don't pay attention to someone talking who doesn't matter to me that much, or they're not part of "my group" or they're not my kind of person, or they're too old, or too young, or not "worthy of respect" in my estimation because of the way they are acting. I recognize that there is often a disconnect between knowing people should be valued and respected, and treating them accordingly. The fact is I probably would have been one of the townspeople squeezing Zacchaeus out, rather than seeking him out like Jesus did. I confess that in general terms now. But what I need is Your help to see the very specific ways I may be disrespecting people and not realize it, so I can change my ways. Would You help me please? Thank You. I know You will, because You want to help me become more like You. Amen.