

Courtesy and Good Manners

What is the meaning of courtesy? To put it simply, it is “polite behavior.” Other similar words that come to mind are respect, thoughtfulness, kindness, and good manners. To be courteous is to show thoughtful consideration of others.

God’s Word—the Best Instruction

We look first to the Bible for the best instruction. God’s Word teaches: “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous” (1 Pet. 3:8). Good instruction is also found in Titus 3:2: “To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men.”

Much of today’s society does not demand good behavior; therefore, it is important that this matter is taught and practiced in God’s kingdom. Today’s world is largely a “me” society, and many, young people especially, have somehow adopted the attitude of needing everything right now. This emphasis on individual expression and immediate satisfaction has given rise to a selfish and demanding generation, although rude behavior is not just specific to young people. Has this approach from the world caused common courtesies and good manners to be old-fashioned or outdated?

A few elders gave their input on whether the value of good manners has changed over their lifetimes. One couple has seen a difference in how we dress for Holy Communion (jeans, not so many suits and dresses), which when too casual can show a lack of respect for the sacrament. On the other hand, some areas have seen how their young have special concern for dressing appropriately for communion, and the reminder to dress appropriately for the sacrament isn’t only directed to the young. Boys and men not removing their caps when inside a building has become more accepted. They also remarked on an increase in lack of consideration toward elders in church.

Show Courtesy to All People

Good manners are the basis of love and respect to each other. We want to show courtesy to all people. An example that comes to mind is when we fly or travel over the international border. We may come in contact with border officials or security guards in airports whose questions may sound unnecessary, or even impolite. Our first reaction may be to get angry or to “talk back” to them. To react in this way gets poor results. We also have to realize that these officials are doing their jobs, even though certain questions may seem mundane or senseless.

The Bible teaches what our attitude should be to persons in authority: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Rom. 13:1) When we have had an unpleasant incident with any official, we want to be careful how we relay the story to others. If we make fun of these people and belittle them, this does not set a good example for anyone listening. As someone once said, “The test of good manners is to be able to put up with bad manners pleasantly.”

We especially want to show good manners to the elderly and handicapped. God’s Word supports this: “Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old man, and fear thy God: I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:32), and “Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumblingblock before the blind, but shalt fear thy God: I am the Lord” (Lev. 19:14).

It may seem difficult or out of our comfort zone to greet an older person who has dementia, someone who is in a wheelchair, or a blind person. What kind of basic courtesies can we show to these individuals? A few examples that are never out of place are: a smile, a handshake, eye contact, call them by name, a cheerful greeting, get down to their level if in a wheelchair. We can make a positive influence on anyone’s life by putting into practice these simple courtesies.

Courtesy Begins at Home

Good manners begin at home. A parent or adult who uses good manners is the best example for any child. How we behave and speak to others will greatly influence those around us. Useful guidance is found in a song of Zion: “Lord, instruct us now, how to be at home, and to listen to each other, to rejoice with one another, not to fight, cause pain, nor dispute in vain” (431:2).

Good manners require practice and effort, so it pays to teach children the basics early. Simple etiquette and common courtesies—like saying “please” and “thank you,” how to behave when eating, not interrupting or rushing to be first in line, helping elders or disabled, responding when spoken to—can go a long way in helping to interact with others. Courtesy should come naturally and shouldn’t be something we need to plan or think about. In this, parents should be mindful of their own example in how we deal with our children and others, before expecting this behavior of our children.

A good attitude in maintaining good manners and courtesy is to consider others more worthy than ourselves. “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves” (Phil. 2:3). If we have respect for all individuals, no matter their age, race, or personality, courtesy will be genuine.

A Finnish practice that seems lacking in our North American culture is rising from your seat to greet a guest. This simple gesture helps the visitor to feel important and welcome.

The Challenge of Modern Technology

An area of concern when using good manners is the use of modern technology. How many of us have walked into a room or area and all persons in it have their faces glued to a hand-held electronic device? We may get some kind of muffled response for a greeting; however, there may be no eye contact, handshake, or other personal interaction. Could excessive use of smartphones cause us to forget how to have personal, one-on-one conversations? Smartphones and other devices are nice for quick messages, to keep in touch with those far away, and for other uses as well, but let’s remember to be respectful in this area when we’re visiting in homes, at services, or at gatherings of the youth. Rude behavior has almost subtly, it seems, crept in with all types of recent technology. These concerns need to be addressed, as we don’t want this type of communication to overtake personal interaction.

A Fruit of Faith

Behaving politely and showing kindness, respect, and thoughtfulness are fruits of faith. Good manners are not just actions. They are expressions of the heart.

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Discussion Questions:

1. How can we instill common courtesies and good manners to our children and youth? Share examples.
2. Do we always remember to use good manners when dealing with those whom we see daily—our loved ones, co-workers, and friends? Why can this be challenging?
3. Read Luke 6:31–35. This part of Scripture is known as the Golden Rule. How can we apply this rule to everyday situations?

4. When we have conflict with others, how can we obey the Eighth Commandment that instructs us to “think and speak well of him and put the best construction on all he does?” For example, how do we apply this when considering the leaders of our country, teachers, neighbors, co-workers, or other believers?