

Courtesy

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Forerunner, "Ready Answer," July-August 2014

“Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another, love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous.” — I Peter 3:8

Many years ago, I worked with a woman who described her philosophy on driving like this: “If I come up on the back of someone, and they are driving too slow, I ride their bumper until they move over. If someone comes up on my bumper, I slow down to annoy them because they are driving too fast.” In her mind, she was the official arbiter of road speeds. Moving over to the right lane never entered her mind, evidently.

On a recent road trip out West, my wife and I noticed how many people seem to think the fast lane is their birthright, and no other lane will do—no matter how slow they drive. In Texas, a state with perhaps the best road system in the nation, every few feet, it seems, the highway department had set up a sign reading, “Left Lane is for Passing Only.” In Utah, the signs read, “Stay in Right Lane Except to Pass.” In Georgia, every so often one will pass a sign reading, “Slow Traffic Keep Right.” However, the American school system has again let us down, having produced a huge number of illiterate drivers because few, if any, obey these signs.

These are small anecdotes, but they point to a lack of courtesy between people here in the States. Lest the reader think this is solely an American issue, while on this trip, I read a June 11, 2014, *USA Today* article, “Be more polite, Beijing residents told.” It related that a summit will be held in Beijing in November with many world leaders in attendance, and some work needs to be done first:

In China’s sharp-elbowed capital, where people jump lines and exhibit brusque manners, the ruling Communist Party launched a campaign Tuesday to encourage Beijing’s 20 million residents to behave better.

Led by the Capital Civilization Office, the same bureaucrats who struggled to wipe out public spitting before the 2008 Summer Olympics, Beijing plans to “raise citizens’ quality” before [the summit].

Targets of the six-month campaign: people who are noisy, smoke in public, curse at sports events, fail to line up for buses, run red lights, drink while they drive and drive aggressively.

Beijingers should also dress properly, show grace in speech and manner and say “hello,” “thank you” and “sorry” more often.

It is not just Beijing residents who need to work on their manners; it is all of us. Countless times, I have held doors for women only to have them sweep through as if they were royalty without a “thank you” to be heard. What happened to our children saying, “Yes, ma’am” and “No, ma’am”? When is the last time we saw a male of any age give his seat to a lady or elderly person?

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once wrote: “It is a wise thing to be polite; consequently it is a stupid thing to be rude. To make enemies by unnecessary and willful incivility is just as insane a proceeding as to set your house on fire. . . .”

A Biblical Behavior

A short definition of *courtesy* would be “polite behavior that shows respect for other people.” Does God have anything to say about courtesy? Remember the “Golden Rule”? Jesus exhorts His disciples in Matthew 7:12: “Treat others as you want them to treat you. This is what the law and the prophets are all about” (*Contemporary English Version*).

If we truly lived by this, we would *always* treat others with courtesy. Chivalry would not be dead. For those younger folks who may not know, chivalry was an ancient, knightly code emphasizing the virtues of service to others, honor, love, and courtesy.

Consider, for instance, how we treat the “hoary head(s)” among us. Leviticus 19:32 commands us: “Show respect for old people and honor them. Reverently obey Me; I am the Lord” (*Good News Bible*). There have been times when I have come up on the rear of a slow-moving car and muttered, “Come on, grandpa, let’s go!” only to remember that I too am a grandpa!

In all seriousness, though, do we revere the older folks as we should? Do we encourage our children to go last in line at a potluck? Do we take the time to do the simple things like teach our kids to look an adult in the eye when they he or she speaks to them? Do we insist that they say, “Yes, sir [or ma’am],” not interrupt an adult conversation, hold doors for them, and generally, as God urges, “Show respect for old people and honor them”?

Why would we be impolite to the elderly—or anyone, for that matter? Why not move over on the road and let others going faster drive by? Why be rude to sales clerks and wait staffs? Why not use the simplest of courtesies like “please” and “thank you”?

The apostle Paul gives the answer in Philippians 2:3: “Don’t be jealous or proud, but be humble and consider others more important than yourselves” (*Contemporary English Version*). Now that is truly a hard thing to do. I can hear it now: “Treat others more important than *moi*? How can that be? The left lane was built *for me*! All others must go around. Why, if I were to move over and let you by, then I would lose face. I would be admitting defeat. I would be a loser in life’s rat race.” Most people fail to consider that, even if they win the rat race, they are still a rat!

In Titus 3:1-2, Paul instructs the younger man, pastoring churches on Crete:

Remind believers to submit themselves to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, and to be ready to do an honorable kind of work. They are not to insult anyone or be argumentative. Instead they are to be gentle and show perfect courtesy to everyone (*International Standard Version [ISV]*).

The ISV renders the Greek word *praiotes* as “courtesy,” while other versions translate it as “meekness,” “gentleness,” or “humility.” The ISV has taken some liberties, but it gives a sense, in today’s English, of what Paul is saying. A humble attitude is necessary to show courtesy to others.

I Peter 3:8 Amplified

So, if the English “courtesy” is not literally in Titus 3:2, is it elsewhere? The Greek word *philophon*, which translates directly to the English “courtesy,” is used only once in the Bible. It comes from two other Greek words, *philos*, meaning “friend,” and *phren*, meaning “understanding,” “perceiving,” and “judging.” These two words indicating “understanding a friend” are put together to suggest the idea of courtesy.

Philophon appears in I Peter 3:8: “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one for another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous” (King James Version). Many translations interpret *philophon* as “kind” or “humble,” and this is correct as well. Both *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon* and *Strong’s Concordance* define *philophon* as “friendly” and “kind,” but *Strong’s* goes a little further, saying it can be summed up as the English word “courteous.”

In I Peter 3:8, the apostle uses only seven Greek words, whereas the King James employs nineteen to get the meaning across. English is a wordy language, is it not? At the risk of boring the reader, we will look at I Peter 3:8 in the Greek, as if it were in an interlinear Bible: *Telos pas homophon sumpathes philadelphos eusplagchnos philophon*. Here it is, word by word, with English equivalents and a note or two:

Telos (finally, in the end, to sum up)

pas (individually and all, each and every one of you, collectively)

homophon (of one mind, in accord with one another; used in the New Testament only this once)

sumpathes (suffering or feeling the same with one another; used only this once)

philadelphos (love as brethren, brothers and sisters, countrymen; used only this once)

eusplagchnos (compassionate, tender-hearted; used just twice)

and finally, *philophon* (friendly, kind, courteous; used only this once).

The apostle Peter is here summarizing his instructions from the previous 20 verses, going back to I Peter 2:17. That passage deals with relationships: how to get along with brethren, mates, and the world at large. Why did God inspire him to use words not previously used nor used again later? Four of these Greek words are used only once in the Bible, one used only twice, all in this single verse!

While there are probably some deeper reasons that my mind is too limited to perceive, Peter has a straightforward goal in writing this verse in this manner. It is likely that using these terms was a simple way for him to get across to his audience something that he had mentioned many times already. If I was writing about cars, I would not want to repeat “car” again and again. As in “I drove a new *car* today. It was a blue *car*. It was a nice *car*. This *car* went fast.” It is doubtful that *Car and Driver* magazine would hire me with such an unsophisticated style. Instead, I could use “vehicle,” “transportation,” “sporty mode of travel,” “a good way to get from point A to point B,” “automobile,” and so on.

Peter, then, to provide more impact, merely sums up his previous points using fresh words. It is a technique we should pay attention to. We could paraphrase I Peter 3:8 like this, which sounds a great deal like *The Amplified Bible*: “In summation, each and every one of you, individually and collectively, have compassion, sympathy, even empathy for one another, loving everyone as if they were your family; be compassionate and courteous.”

Lovers of Themselves

The only way to do what Peter recommends is to consider others more important than ourselves. This can be quite hard to do in this competitive world we live in. We have to win in everything. We have to be in the fastest line at the bank or store. We have to ensure no one breaks in line ahead of us. We have to close up on the car ahead and not leave a gap to allow another car to cut in.

If we fail to do these things, what happens? We are life’s losers, right? Of course not. There is no pain in living a courteous life. It does not cost us a thing to tell someone, “No, you go first.”

Why has our society coarsened? Is it because our schools for decades now have emphasized how “special” we all are? We have many adults now who cannot read or write very well and who know little history or math, but they feel really good about themselves! They have high self-esteem. Anything that comes their way is deserved or owed to them because we have taught them that.

Or are we less polite because, as a people, we drift further from God every day?

The reason we have such a lack of courtesy in today’s world can be found in II Timothy 3:1-2, where the apostle Paul writes: “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves. . . .” He goes on to list about eighteen more traits people will exhibit in the end time, but he leads the list with “lovers of themselves.” If we are first and foremost in our lives a lover of ourselves, then we are *never* wrong. We are *always* first, and, we think, deservedly so! The left lane is ours! We are the direct opposite of “humble.” We could not be courteous if we tried.

Consider verses 2-5 from the *Contemporary English Version*. Remember that Paul is speaking of the last days, and note how each of these traits relate to courtesy:

People will love only themselves and money. They will be proud, stuck-up, rude, and disobedient to their parents. They will also be ungrateful, godless, heartless and hateful. Their words will be cruel, and they will have no self-control or pity. These people will hate everything that is good. They will be sneaky, reckless, and puffed up with pride. Instead of loving God, they will love pleasure. Even though they will make a show of being religious, their religion won’t be real. Don’t have anything to do with such people.

Powerful words, indeed. Perhaps the reader thinks that I am making too much of the lack of courtesy around us. Maybe so. But it is something foundational, something basic, to a Christian life. A humble and God-fearing person will naturally be courteous. If we esteem others greater than ourselves, we *will* be courteous. If we are striving to live in accordance with God’s laws, we *will* be courteous.

So, does this mean that by simply saying “please” and “thank you,” we will be in God’s Kingdom? No, it is not quite that easy, but it is a start! Conversely, it is probably safe to say that those who are impolite and rude will not like their reward at all. As the sign says, “Keep Right.”