

Respect Or Respect Of Persons?

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The Bible frequently cautions us against respect of persons, yet we are also instructed to show proper respect for leaders, the elderly and others. What is the proper balance?

Unlike the current parental teaching, people in previous generations were taught to practice different attitudes of respect for people and property than the public generally holds today. Deference was given freely to many. Men and boys were expected to give up their seats on crowded buses and street cars to women, the elderly or disabled. People commonly addressed strangers—both rich or poor—as "Sir," "Ma'am," "Mister" or "Miss." It took a great deal of familiarity with someone before one would break into a more informal manner with them.

The same general attitude was held toward property as well. All of us have stories of how "we never locked our doors" when we were growing up. Or our parents would allow us to roam the whole city when we were kids. Today, we would not dare to do these things because there is so much less respect for life and property. In our major cities, one can be randomly killed in a drive-by shooting while minding one's own business.

In these days, one rarely hears children addressing parents and adults as "sir" or "ma'am." Even a "thank you" is hard to come by. They do not respond to questions from their elders with a "Yes, sir," "No, sir," "Yes, ma'am" or "No, ma'am." And in the general public even the president is called "George" or "Bill" or worse!

Showing Respect in Scripture

In Leviticus 19:32 it says, "You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the LORD." This theme runs throughout the Bible, appearing in such words that are rendered into the English most commonly as "fear," "honor," "respect," and sometimes even as strong as "reverence." Romans 13:7 makes this clear. "Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor." So we find it actually commanded to give deference, not based on whether we think they deserve it, but simply because they are somebody who fits a certain description (like the elderly) or who is an elected, appointed or ordained person.

So strong is this theme, that God shows that insolence toward those who should be respected presages calamity (*cf.* II Kings 2:23-25 and Isaiah 3:5). We should thus be warned that when we see disrespect rising, severe social troubles are on the horizon.

The purpose of these scriptures is to help insure that there is a proper attitude toward God. God is the Giver of all authority (Romans 13:1) and it is really out of respect for the God-given office that the deference is shown.

But is formality in reference to office always required? No. A husband's office as head of the family is God-given, but neither wife, nor children call him "Mister." The formality is dropped within the confines and familiarity of family. I know of no western culture that does not follow this pattern.

Forms of Respect in the Church

In the church we have long been in the custom of addressing each other as Mr. and Mrs. These forms of address are not as formal as they used to be, but insistence on them may have been overdone. Formality tends to make relationships stilted and narrow and can even move one to a far more serious elitism, which is nothing more than respect of persons.

The church is called a "brotherhood" in I Peter 2:17, a "family" in Ephesians 3:15. Jesus said, "[Y]ou are all brethren" (Matthew 23:8). Beyond that, there is strong evidence that our English word "mister" is derived from "master," which Jesus said not to use in addressing each other as a title elevating one above another (*cf.* Matthew 23:7-11).

Why do we call one another by these formal titles? Most likely, it is because of a sincere effort not to disrespect, especially an elder's or deacon's office. But is it also possible that something more important is lost? Would a family be better off if the father was called "Mister"? What qualities would be lost? Warmth of affection, intimacy and approachability are three that immediately come to mind.

Respect of God and Jesus

Do we lose respect because we call God, "Father"? What is implied by calling Him "Father" rather than God? Is it not a title implying greater intimacy? Now what about "Abba, Father," which is "Father, Father"? Do we lose even more respect for Him? Of course not, because respect can be generated in more than one manner. The respect God wants us to have for Him and His Family is one of genuine warmth, intimate feeling and affectionate desire to please and help. Formality does not help much here.

We are not embarrassed at all to call the great apostles of the first century by their first names. Do we disrespect them when we do so? More than that, we do not hesitate one whit to call our Creator and Savior by His first name—without a "Mister" either! We simply call Him "Jesus."

We do not disrespect Him because He has earned our respect through our knowledge of Him. Because of what He is in terms of character and action, we give Him our affection with our submission. That is the basis of right respect and has nothing to do with formality. It has everything to do with love. If we love, we will be respectful whatever a person's station in life. Why we will even love, and therefore respect, our enemies!

In summary, much, if not most, of the formal respect given in terms of titles attached to a person's name in both this world and the church may seem forced, artificial and even hollow. We are obligated by God to give respect, even though it may seem forced. But we should not insist that we brothers and sisters call one another by formal titles even though one has an office. Perhaps even more so, we should give sincere and heartfelt respect to those in office within the church for their work's sake. Personally, I have never been offended because someone in the church called me "John." But each of us should strive to earn that respect the godly way by loving one another. If one of us is in an office, and he is striving to love the brethren, the respect—real, godly respect—will be given.