



## GUIDES TO CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

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# RESPECT

## Learning about respect and civility

### The purpose of this guide

We want you to think about the way you treat other people: younger and older siblings, parents, people of all ages in your circle of family, friends and acquaintances, as well as strangers you encounter in the course of everyday life.

We will offer some answers to important questions like:

- Why are respect and civility important?
- Is respect owed or earned?
- What happens if we treat respect as optional or conditional?

## Defining key terms

Table 1 below defines key terms related to our topic.

**Table 1: Key terms related to respect and civility**

Personal quality or attitude	Meaning of this word
Respect/respectfulness	Being respectful means treating other people with courtesy and dignity. Having an attitude of respectfulness means being consistently respectful towards others.
Disrespect/disrespectfulness	Being disrespectful means treating other people rudely, e.g. by ignoring them, belittling or dismissing them, or mocking or insulting them. Having an attitude of disrespectfulness means being consistently disrespectful towards other people.
Civility	Being civil means behaving as a good citizen who values respectful, cordial and orderly relations with others in the community should behave. Having an attitude of civility means consistently behaving in a civil way towards our fellow citizens.
Incivility	Being uncivil means treating others in the community in ways that damage relationships and create tensions and conflict. Having an attitude of incivility means consistently behaving in an uncivil way.
Tolerance	Being tolerant means putting up with beliefs, opinions, behaviour etc. that you dislike or disagree with.
Intolerance	Being intolerant means being unable or unwilling to put up with beliefs, opinions, behaviour etc. that you dislike or disagree with.

Let's make three other points clear at this stage:

- Respecting other people does not mean we cannot criticise, admonish, or punish them if they have done wrong. Criticism, admonishment, and punishment can be respectful if they are intended for the good of others, to make them better people. Parents argue that appropriately disciplining their children is evidence that they respect them, that if they didn't respect their children, they would allow them to run wild. Parents see respect (like love) as requiring them to act in the best interests of their children.
- Similarly, disagreeing with another person should not automatically be interpreted as disrespecting them. It is possible to disagree with other people's beliefs, opinions, attitudes and behaviour while still respecting them as persons and treating them with dignity. People are to be distinguished from what they think, say and do.
- Finally, showing respect to a person who happens to be controversial should not be interpreted as approval of or endorsement of that person's beliefs or actions. If you happened to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un going for a stroll and he smiled and greeted you, would it be fair if others interpreted your polite reply as an endorsement of all he believes and does? No. Similarly, it would be unfair to assume that if you agreed with him on some things you agree with him on everything.

### **Why are respect and civility important?**

Civility is vital for healthy relationships. It means treating others respectfully even if we disagree with them about things we think are important. Civility therefore also entails tolerance. Respect, tolerance and civility serve as a 'glue' that binds people together, whether in marriages and families, in workplaces, in institutions like clubs, schools, churches and political parties, or more widely in societies and nations, most especially nations comprising people from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds.

Respect for authorities and willingness to subordinate ourselves to authorities is vital for establishing and maintaining law and order in societies. If, in a football game, players start to ignore the umpire and flout the rules, all kinds of foul play ensue, and the game descends into chaos and violence. The game is only truly enjoyable when players follow the rules, and the umpire applies the rules fairly. Freeing ourselves to play in an unruly way hurts people and spoils the game. In the same way, communities in which people feel free to flout the law and refuse to acknowledge authorities soon cease to be functioning communities.

### **Some relevant cultural differences**

Australia has become very multicultural. One of the challenges of living well with each other in this situation is avoiding unintentionally offending each other because we have different ideas about what constitutes good manners.

In many cultures, the young are expected to be deferential towards those who are older. Children are taught that adults are their social superiors by virtue of their greater age, knowledge, experience and wisdom. The typical response of people from those cultures who see children being cheeky, rude or defiant towards parents, teachers or other adults is dismay and anger.

In some cultures, 'saving face' (preserving one's own dignity and the dignity of others) is very important. It is especially disgraceful to treat another person disrespectfully in the presence of others, causing them to 'lose face' (i.e. be publicly dishonoured).

Anglo-Australians have a reputation for cheekiness towards people who behave arrogantly. They might explain their cheekiness by saying they have an 'egalitarian streak'. They prefer modesty and humility in high achievers and people in positions of authority. If they think famous or important people are getting 'too big for their boots' (i.e. puffed up with pride), they put them down. Does this mean that Australians who put down puffed-up people are disrespectful?

There are a couple of things we can say about put-downs.

- Puffed-up people's pride can be punctured in ways that are pointed but at the same time good-natured and humorous. But it can also be done in ways that are nasty and designed to cause shame and hurt. Good-natured pride-puncturing is less disrespectful than nasty pride-puncturing. (It might even be seen as respectful – a type of 'tough love' – if it is designed to change them for the better.) And from a relationships point of view, attempts to puncture pride in a friendly way are preferable to attempts that are intended to wound.
- While we might think the teasing we dish out is funny and harmless, the person on the receiving end may not. Trying to be funny at other people's expense can backfire on us. We can't demand that people we poke fun at take it well.

### **How are we doing in the respect and civility departments?**

Young people often assume that the way things are now is normal, or even the way things should be. Older people, having lived through changes, are usually more critical about the way things are.

Older people often complain about declining standards of respect. They say that 'common courtesy' and good manners are not as common as they used to be, that children and young people especially no longer treat parents, elders, teachers, pastors, doctors, political leaders and police with the respect they were given in the past.

Table 2 below lists some examples of how older people see a 'culture of disrespect' as playing itself out in different spheres of life today.

**Table 2: Disrespect in different spheres of life**

Sphere of life	Examples of a culture of disrespect
Family life: parents and children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children and teens displaying a strong sense of entitlement and an ungrateful and contemptuous attitude toward their parents.</li> </ul>
Engaging with older people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Failing to acknowledge seniority by calling older people by their first name rather than Mr or Mrs, or Sir or Madam.</li> <li>• Failing to give priority to seniors, e.g. on footpaths or seating on public transport.</li> </ul>
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calling teachers by their first name or by derogatory nicknames.</li> <li>• Unruly behaviour in class.</li> <li>• Stretching or disregarding rules, e.g. in relation to uniforms, hair, makeup and jewellery.</li> <li>• Being careless with or destructive of school property.</li> </ul>
Male-female relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being unaware of or disregarding boundaries of acceptable behaviour.</li> <li>• Treating persons of the opposite sex as sex objects rather than as full human beings.</li> </ul>
Social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Posting disrespectful comments online that you wouldn't have the courage to say in person.</li> <li>• 'Ghosting', i.e. ending a relationship by suddenly and without explanation ending all communication.</li> <li>• 'Cancelling' or trying to cancel people whose views or actions you deem unacceptable.</li> </ul>
Sport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbally abusing umpires and players.</li> <li>• Carelessly or deliberately injuring other players.</li> <li>• 'Gamesmanship', i.e. using dubious ploys and tactics to gain an advantage.</li> </ul>
Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unstatesmanlike behaviour in parliament, e.g. name-calling, interjecting, evading questions, framing opponents and their arguments in the worst possible light.</li> <li>• Assuming that politicians are 'in it for themselves', corrupt and obsessed with power and publicity.</li> </ul>
Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presuming a right to criticise (even publicly) pastors, bishops and lay leaders in the church.</li> <li>• Presuming a right to participate fully in the life of a church community while openly disregarding rules of moral conduct.</li> <li>• Unfairly stereotyping clergy as drunks or paedophiles.</li> </ul>
Healthcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regarding your own self-diagnosis (using Dr Google) as just as authoritative (or more authoritative) than a doctor's diagnosis.</li> <li>• Presuming to tell doctors how to treat you.</li> </ul>

Law and order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Calling police derogatory names.</li> <li>• Unfairly stereotyping police as racist or corrupt.</li> <li>• Bending and stretching laws or acting as though they apply only to others.</li> </ul>
COVID-19 pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assuming that political leaders, public health officials and pharmaceutical companies were motivated by a desire to use the pandemic to advance themselves, and to harm people rather than protect them.</li> <li>• Unreasonably harsh restrictions and sanctions for breaches.</li> <li>• The 'sovereign citizen' movement, i.e. the claim by some citizens who were unhappy with pandemic measures that they were not obliged to respect the law.</li> </ul>

**How can we explain the contemporary lack of respect and civility?**

There is no one single or simple explanation to explain the levels of disrespect and incivility in contemporary society. Table 3 below sets out major features of contemporary society that undermine respect and civility.

**Table 3: Features of contemporary society that undermine respect and civility**

<b>Feature of contemporary society</b>	<b>How this feature undermines respect and civility</b>
The dominant values of contemporary popular culture – freedom, identity, authenticity, autonomy, equality and the pursuit of personal happiness	<p>These values are frequently presented and interpreted in ways that undermine traditional values of self-control, empathy and the pursuit of the common good, all of which need to be kept strong to maintain a culture of respect and civility.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concern with identity often manifests in 'us versus them' thinking, and indifference or hostility towards people outside the in-group.</li> <li>• Freedom, autonomy and authenticity shape us to see ourselves as possessing the right to decide what is right and wrong for ourselves, to act upon our feelings ('be true to yourself'), and to resist being told what to believe and how to behave ('don't let anyone tell you what to do').</li> <li>• Advocates of equality may teach young people to be sceptical of authority and to view claims to authority as 'grabs for power'.</li> <li>• Equality is taken to mean that everyone is equally entitled to express their opinion and nobody's opinion is better than anyone else's, which encourages anti-intellectualism and resistance to authority.</li> <li>• The pursuit of personal happiness encourages self-centredness and selfishness, undermining our empathy for others and our concern for the common good.</li> </ul>
The nature of popular entertainment	<p>Popular entertainment both glorifies and trivialises rudeness, violence, rebellion, self-gratification and defiantly doing your own thing.</p> <p>It frequently portrays traditional authority figures such as parents and politicians as incompetent and out-of-touch, while portraying kids as smart and savvy.</p>

	<p>Coarse language and lewd behaviour are portrayed as amusing, rebelliousness is portrayed as heroic, casual sex and violence are portrayed as inconsequential, and winning is prioritised over doing the right thing. Kids brought up on a diet of such entertainment are – surprise, surprise! – influenced by it.</p>
Social media	<p>Communicating via social media is less personal than face-to-face communication. We are less guarded in what we say to (or about) people who are not physically present with us.</p> <p>Online communities of like-minded people form within which they gain status by displays of hostility towards people in rival communities.</p> <p>Social media fuels 'cancel culture', i.e. extra-judicial efforts to punish people with unpopular views, supposedly in the name of justice, by 'deplatforming' them (trying to silence them by condemning their views, attacking their reputation, and calling for their dismissal from their job).</p>
The medicalisation of anti-social behaviour, i.e. attributing offensive behaviour to mental illness or personality disorders.	<p>Attributing anti-social behaviour to an illness or condition or external stress means nobody is personally responsible. It also conveniently enables badly behaved people to frame themselves not as perpetrators but as tragically afflicted people in need of care.</p>
Poor parenting	<p>Parents who role model disrespectful behaviour to their children transmit it.</p> <p>Parents who ignore, excuse, or laugh at their children's disrespectful behaviour are effectively endorsing it.</p> <p>Children who are not taught to respect and obey parents learn to think that all authority is open to challenge and to expect to get their own way.</p>
Media coverage that excuses or even celebrates bad behaviour by influential people such as political leaders and celebrities from the world of sports and entertainment.	<p>Influential people are influential. Others look up to them and model themselves on them. No further explanation is needed.</p>

## **Q&A on respect**

### ***Is respect owed or earned?***

Let's consider this question by considering the Golden Rule (which for our purposes can also be described as the principle of reciprocity or principle of enlightened self-interest), which is found in some form in virtually every culture. The Christian version says, 'Treat others the way you would like them to treat you'. Other versions frame it negatively: 'Don't treat others in ways you wouldn't like them to treat you'. For our purposes, this means that we are advised to make treating others with respect – acting as if we owe them respect – our default position. It is not only good for us to act this way. If everyone consistently observed the Golden Rule, trust, goodwill and community spirit would increase, and everyone would be happier and more prosperous.

If, on the other hand, we adopt a policy of respecting only people who first show respect to us, we are likely to find our aloofness reciprocated. We risk making a bad start to all our relationships.

By adopting a policy of extending respect to others from the start, we are earning respect at the same time.

People in positions of status or seniority, such as parents, elders, teachers, doctors, police, judges, government officials and pastors frequently feel that by virtue of their status or their expertise, they are owed respect. This stance makes respect conditional on the possession of positive or admirable qualities such as wisdom, expertise or political authority and implies that people who lack such qualities (children, people with intellectual disability etc.) aren't worthy of respect. People in those positions do well to try to earn and maintain the respect of people under them if being respected is important to them.

People of low status or seniority, who lack the positive and admirable qualities that elicit others' respect (such as children, learners of every age and people whose behaviour has harmed their reputation) also do well to earn and maintain respect by being consistently respectful to others.

It is easy to be respectful toward people in positions of authority over us if we regard them as deserving, e.g. because they are very knowledgeable and skilled in their field of expertise. But what if we find ourselves subordinate to somebody who doesn't seem deserving of respect? Consider the following:

- A junior soldier might not like his general's behaviour or his orders, but he obeys him because he respects the rank of general and because he realises that the army will fall into disarray and be less effective as a fighting force if soldiers stop obeying their superiors' orders.
- A junior doctor might dislike the arrogance of a senior consultant doctor, whose instructions she is obliged to follow, but she nevertheless is courteous and follows them because she respects his knowledge and experience and wants to maintain a positive working relationship with him so she can continue to learn from him and because he monitors her work and will very likely influence her chances of being accepted as a trainee consultant.
- A junior worker horrified by the corrupt behaviour of a superior reports his superior's misconduct not out of malice but because he values ethical business practices and wants to protect the company's reputation.

### ***What attitude should I have towards people who disagree with me about things that are important to me?***

In Table 4 below, we present three approaches to this question that are evident in contemporary society. Which do you see as the most respectful, most mature and most likely to bring people into a right relationship with each other?

**Table 4: Three approaches to dealing with disagreement**

<p><b>The 'cancel culture' approach</b></p>	<p>I demonise anybody who challenges my sacred beliefs and cherished behaviours. I portray them as disrespectful, hateful, intolerant, discriminatory and a threat to my safety. I appeal to the authorities to ban them or punish them for expressing their beliefs or acting upon them.</p>
<p><b>Avoidance</b></p>	<p>If my disagreement is with someone I know and want to maintain a relationship with, I treat our disagreement as a threat to our relationship. If we are to maintain any sort of relationship, the topic we disagree about must never come up in conversation. I hold out hope that if I treat them well, my faultless behaviour will, over time, influence them to respect and accept my position.</p> <p>If my disagreement is with someone I don't know well (or at all) and have no intention of getting to know better (e.g. a distant acquaintance or stranger in a social media discussion forum), I don't bother saying or writing anything that will create an argument; I just let it go.</p>
<p><b>Dialogue</b></p>	<p>My default position with people who disagree with me on matters that are important to me is to treat them as friends or potential friends, not as enemies. I welcome the opportunity to listen carefully to their perspective so I can fully understand it and its logic or rationality. I 'play the ball, not the man'; in other words, I do not allow my disrespect for my friend's <i>argument</i> to carry over into disrespect or disdain for them <i>as a person</i>. I invite my friend to (fairly) critique my position and to be open to me fairly critiquing theirs. In this way, we learn from each other and improve each other's ability to make our case well and come closer to the best resolution. At the end of our dialogue, if we still cannot fully agree, we note with satisfaction the things we hold in common and agree to disagree respectfully on the things that still divide us.</p>

## Christian perspectives on respect and authority

### Key Bible texts

In Genesis 1:27, in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, we learn that God 'created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them'. Because humans are created by God in his own image – in special ways resembling God himself, with powers of reasoning, with a conscience and being inherently relational – humans have a special dignity and are to be respected.

Still in the Old Testament, God calls on his people to respect each other in the Fourth through to the Tenth commandments (see Exodus 20:12–17):

- Fourth Commandment: Honour your father and mother. This is about respecting our parents, and honouring, serving and obeying others in positions of authority.
- Fifth Commandment: You shall not murder. This is about respecting others' lives.
- Sixth Commandment: You shall not commit adultery. This is about respecting ourselves and others by using our sexuality in ways that are pure and decent.
- Seventh Commandment: You shall not steal. This is about respecting others' property.
- Eighth Commandment: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. This is about respecting others' reputations.
- Ninth and Tenth Commandments: You shall not covet your neighbour's spouse, house and other property. These are also about respecting others' relationships and property.



Christians' respect for fellow humans is also based on God's love for them as demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (see John 3:16), and Jesus' commandment to his followers to love others with the same sort of love he showed to them (John 13:34,35).

In Matthew 7:12, Jesus sums up the teachings of the Jewish law and prophets as treating others the way we would like them to treat us, further emphasising respect as the default attitude of Christians towards their fellow human beings.

Here are a few more New Testament verses about respect:

- Acts 23:5
- Romans 12:10,18; 13:1–10
- Ephesians 6:1–3
- Philippians 2:3
- Hebrews 13:17
- 2 Timothy 2:23
- 1 Peter 2:17; 5:5

### **What about supposed advancements on the Golden Rule?**

Some people claim that it is more respectful and loving to treat others the way they want to be treated than to treat them in the way you'd like them to treat you. They call this the 'Platinum Rule' or 'Titanium Rule'. There are certainly situations in which we do well to consider the feelings and preferences of others.

However, if we find out that what they really mean is 'treat *me* the way *I* want to be treated, not the way you would like to be treated if you were me', it becomes apparent that it is self-serving rather than other-centred. It comes from a prideful attitude that says, 'I know what is right and good for me; if you love me, you will respect my wishes and affirm my choices'. This is emotional blackmail, the weaponising of love.

Christianity teaches that ever since Eve's encounter with the serpent in the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 3), humans have sought to be like God and decide right and wrong and good and evil for themselves. Our selfish and sinful nature causes us to desire things that are not in line with God's will for us and not in the best interests of ourselves or others.

### **Summing up**

- For Christians the default position is respect for others.
- The last six of the Ten Commandments are about respect.
- The Christian does not rush to judge and condemn when he or she does not have all of the relevant facts.
- Where there are irreconcilable differences, Christians will aim to disagree respectfully. Disagreement need not be accompanied by hostility and condemnation.
- Respecting another person does not mean we must agree with their beliefs or approve of their actions.

### **Further reading**

Adam Dodds, 9 Feb 2024, 'The problem with authority', *Eternity News*,  
<https://www.eternitynews.com.au/bible-and-theology/the-problem-with-authority/>.