



Manners, more than social cement

The other day an elderly lady was walking gingerly along, obviously impeded by infirmity. Suddenly she was almost bowled over by a lanky youth on a skateboard. Did the boy stop to see if the lady was hurt, or help her pick up her scattered belongings? No he did not. In fact he abused her for being in his way. Are you surprised at this story? Probably not. Perhaps you have witnessed similar episodes yourself. Generally we hardly expect people today to be courteous, to revere the aged, women, or to be kind to the weak. While I was expecting our last baby, I was chilled to discover that my "condition" no longer automatically ensured consideration from my "neighbour".

Since children spend so much time at school, it is not unreasonable to surmise that they will learn most of their social skills there. This will either be implicit, at the playground, or explicit via values education in the classroom. The thrust of the values education appears to be that children should be so self-confident and esteem themselves so highly that they have no need for approval from others. This ought then to eliminate crippling insecurities which are allegedly manifested as anti-social behaviour and which inhibit creativity and learning. "Life skills" are taught as the means of making one's way through life and overcoming its difficulties. Life skills are concerned with protecting and promoting self. After all, a person needs to be well-equipped to "get ahead" in this tough world.

That all sounds very reasonable. Parents, naturally, want their children to do well and would spare them suffering. This is true of most parents, even bad ones, as the Lord Jesus noted when He taught about the extent of the Father's love, contrasting it to the poor copy found commonly in society (Luke 11:11-13). Which father or mother would not want their child to be able to "stick up for himself"? They would consider themselves remiss in their duty if they did not see to it that somehow their children learned "survival skills". However, this is in stark contrast to the training in righteousness and the denying of self that is taught in the Scriptures.

Just as the hungering and thirsting for righteousness is set among other attitudes and actions of selflessness in the Beatitudes, so all our teaching of righteousness should be focused on loss of self, thus honouring God and promoting the good of our neighbour. Rather than elbowing others out of the way, the Christ-like way is to let others pass, even to actively assist them, if it does good to do so. Some will say that we must first love ourselves before we can love others, even claiming that Christ taught this when He summarised the second table of the Law, saying that we must love our neighbour as ourselves. Does this really mean that we must first love ourselves, or is it really just an old Greek heresy as Calvin points out in his *Institutes* (2.8.54), one of many Greek ideas that over the centuries has resurfaced in new garb to fool fresh generations of Christians. A simple example easily demonstrates the truth of the matter: say there are two men who are starving. They have only one piece of bread between them. What would the Christian do? If he loves himself, he would eat all of it. That is natural. If he merely loves his neighbour, he would share it. If he loves his neighbour as if it was himself, *he would give him the whole piece of bread*. That is the self-denial that Christ taught. Of course this goes against children's natural tendencies, and so training in good manners, which is really the practice of selflessness, should begin early and must be thorough. Good manners require a loss of self. It is no coincidence that in this age of self-seeking there is a marked decline in courtesy. This can be seen in even the youngest children, whose very tone of voice is often belligerent. It is a short step from being careless and ill-mannered toward others, to being lawless, especially if there has been no restraint of violent behaviour and attitudes.

It is not "majoring on minors" to insist on even the smallest courtesies by children since Scripture teaches that training is by a process and that obedience precedes understanding, Isaiah 28:10. It

is for the comfort and benefit of others that we teach children good table manners, for example. The enjoyment of eating is diminished for others if mouths are open whilst chewing, full whilst speaking, arms are lunged across one another to reach food or condiments and everyone grabs for the best portion. It is so easy to let the little courtesies slip, some may even imply that it is snobbery or pretension to keep them up. However, it is an act of sacrifice and service to observe these niceties *for the sake of others*. Our enjoyment of food should not make us heedless toward others. Seen in that light, all etiquette and good manners become opportunities to minister to others. Children often sincerely look for ways to express love to brethren or neighbours, as a response to instruction. Selfless courtesy is an everyday means to do so.

As Christian parents, we need to be on our guard that we do not allow the standards of the world set the standard of our homes (e.g. some children's films and shows thematically teach the most anti-Christian ethics, as do many contemporary children's books). It is a cause of great shame if our children push and shove or help themselves first at church lunches, picnics or even just when there is coffee after church. When our children visit other people's homes, it is important that they are good ambassadors for Christ and our families. Do our children always say "please" and "thank you" or remember to "speak with two words"? (Why can children learn the most complicated computer jargon, memorise screeds of dialogue from films, remember profanity after hearing it once, yet the little words "please" and "thank you" are so difficult to remember?!?)

Sadly, it is common to see children remaining seated when there are adults standing, elderly people left to struggle with loads whilst able-bodied youngsters ignore their plight, rudeness in public etc. For the Christian, young or old, these are opportunities to show the love of God to others. Being an effective witness for the Lord is most often seen in the little things that we do every day. Not everyone is called to preach the Gospel in a "dynamic", traffic-stopping way, or to struggle in inhospitable mission fields, but we all are called to be salt and light to the world. These are not extraordinary commodities, rather, they are quite common, everyday necessities. This indicates that we are to shine and season in the ordinary stations of life and to do that in a way that really stands out. Children who are trained to have good manners do stand out.

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