

Let No One Despise Your Youth

By Nathan Albright

Everybody wants it. Songs have been written about it. Wars have been fought over it. Families have been ripped apart because of the lack of it. A famous comedian actually built an entire career out of joking about not getting any of it.

What is it? Respect, that's what! R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Those seven letters arguably possess the power to change lives more than any others with the possible exception of L-O-V-E. Respect is a critical component of a healthy life and can have a profound impact on a person's worldview. Without it life can seem empty and meaningless.

But what is respect and why is it so important—even for those in God's Church? How does it affect both the young and the old? Furthermore, how can those God has called according to His purpose obtain it?

Jesus and a Formula for Happiness

When giving the "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus Christ presented one of the most profound secrets to human fulfillment and happiness. If the world applied this secret all wars would end and human suffering would come to a screeching halt. Furthermore, if God's Church truly grasped this secret and put it into practice daily, discord among the brethren would evaporate. Here is how the Messiah described this marvelous secret.

Therefore all things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. (Mt. 7:12)

These words known popularly as the "golden rule", speak volumes about Jesus Christ and what he desires for His human family. The core of this great spiritual law is simple: we should treat others, as we would want them to treat us. Therefore, if we desire to be respected, then we should also desire to give respect to others. Regrettably, this is easier said than done.

The Bible speaks prolifically about respect and its role in our lives. However, for the sake of this article I would like to focus on the instructions found in Paul's first letter to Timothy. This wonderful epistle contains a profound lesson to all of God's people. To begin let's gather some information regarding this great evangelist who was personally taught by the apostle Paul and who honored his mentor so faithfully.

A Little Background

After years of loyal service, beginning when Timothy was a teenager, Paul gave his young apprentice a challenging task. Timothy was appointed as the pastor in Ephesus. This was done with the understanding that Timothy would instruct the members of the congregations of that city, as well as the leadership of those congregations in various important matters of Christian living and behavior. Additionally, this young evangelist was specifically instructed to preach against various doctrinal heresies involving fables and endless genealogies, as well as issues of law keeping and obedience. One of the obstacles Timothy faced in this assignment was his age (he was very young) and the potential lack of respect he would receive because of it. Timothy was far younger than most pastors then as well as today. However, Paul respected him and trusted in his abilities. Because of this respect he presented him with this great responsibility and gave him council on how to discharge the difficult task that lay before him. This council was provided in the form of letters (epistles) sent to the young pastor.

Let No One Despise Your Youth

During the course of one letter, Paul states something interesting that is highly relevant in our times. Notice what he writes:

Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. (1 Tim. 4:12)

The word “youth” used here comes from the Greek word *neotes*. This word can refer to the very youthful as well as to those who had fully grown into an adult, which was the case with Timothy. The word “despise” used in this verse is *kataphroneo*, which means to disregard, or disrespect. Basically, Paul was telling Timothy that youth is no reason to disrespect someone, a principle many of God’s people today sometimes forget. Often young adults in God’s Church are seen as little more than big children. This despite the fact that some have achieved considerable success in their short lives. Some have graduated from prestigious universities. Some have distinguished themselves as thoughtful students of God’s word. And some have lived exemplary lives of service. Regrettably, many find it difficult to look beyond a person’s age. It is possible that Paul was cautioning Timothy that he may encounter the same problem in his pastorate. Here Paul is exhorting his young apprentice that although he may fall prey to them, such judgements are wrong.

Respecters of Persons

God’s word admonishes His people to not be a respecter of persons, nor to disrespect others for superficial reasons, including their youth. This teaching applies to His Church today as well. Consider two applications of this principle. First, adults should be wary of dismissing the wisdom of young people in their fellowship. As a matter of fact Jesus said that there was something very valuable to be learned even from little children (Mt. 18:1-4). The point here is that young people can serve as an example to all the household of faith in many ways. It is noteworthy that Timothy was to be, even as a relatively young person, an example for others in behavior and in speech.

However, there is another critical point in Paul’s teaching. Those who are younger members of God’s Church have a great responsibility to live righteously and to be a good example to others. In other words, Paul was not inviting Timothy to be all puffed up and proud, demanding respect, but was rather enjoining him to act in a manner worthy of respect. That same admonition applies to young people in God’s Church today. People watch us and it is important that when they do they see Christ living in us.

The Law of Deference

Shortly after this instruction, Paul reveals to Timothy that showing deference and respect was a key for him in successfully leading those in his care. Notice what the apostle writes.

Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters. (1 Tim. 5:1-2)

The point Paul was making was that all of God’s people are to be treated with respect. In a very real sense all of God’s people whether young or old, are spiritual brothers and sisters. Brothers and sisters are our equals, and as such, people in charge should treat young and old with the respect and honor befitting an equal.

It is a difficult (even if necessary) thing to be corrected by a younger person, and such situations demand respect for the person being corrected as well as acknowledgment in the rightness of the correction. Paul understood this profound truth and we need to understand it too.

Lessons For Us Today

The message of respect in 1 Timothy is an important one for us today. Most of the problems between so many people in God’s Church have, at their base, the issue of respect. While the burden of respect rests upon us all, it does not lie equally. Those who possess the wisdom of years as well as those who

are in positions of authority and visibility, and hence serve as the exemplars of behavior for others, have the greater responsibility.

However, with that said, we should all behave with respect for others, for God is the Father of us all, whether old or young, male or female, rich or poor, big or small. And the deference we show to others reflects the level of respect we have for our Creator and His plan for all of us.

A Final Thought

There has been a lot of grousing recently in God's Church about the issue of generation gaps and the difficulties of reaching the young. In the larger analysis, the difficulty in reaching the young is due in part to a lack of respect many people have for the young. This despite the fact that young people in the church today fight against a world that is far more threatening than it ever was for previous generations. For those who are winning this fight there is a story worthy of respect.

On the other hand those who have stayed the course for decades and whose hourglass is almost empty have a story of their own—one that is a source of inspiration and hope. They too deserve great respect. This is just one lesson brought out in the life of Timothy. As a young man he was placed in a position of great authority, and his faithful discharging of the task can serve as a wonderful example of the reliability of young people when properly taught and ENTRUSTED with responsibility.

Of the greatest interest to us, though, is the fact that like Timothy, young people of today are not to be discarded or dismissed. God does not tolerate contempt for His children, and neither should we. If we do not treat our brethren with respect, regardless of age or rank or title, then we are not acting in a godly fashion. This is an important lesson for us today, and it is one we should prayerfully consider. God's message to the young following Him today has never changed. It is the same given to a young man nearly 2000 years ago: "let no one despise your youth." In other words, let no one disrespect you because you are young, and treat everyone with respect as well.