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Manners

by William P. Wilson, M.D.

-- *Commentaries from past newsletters – Fall 2003*

While meditating on what I wanted to choose for this edition of my newsletter, I was stimulated to select the subject that I finally decided on by an event that took place in my office. A young man was referred to me by a friend of his because of his inability to find any direction for his life. This young man was from a family in which both his mother and father were professional people. When he came for his appointment he had a grungy baseball cap on his head and his clothes were unkempt. On top of that he had BO. I would have expected this if he was a street person or a drug addict, but he had completed three years of college, was not a common laborer, and I knew he was not taught to look and smell like that at home. It was at that time I realized something has happened in our population in which manners have disappeared from social intercourse, especially among the young.

I did, therefore, begin to observe more carefully the behavior of people in the environment in which I lived. I noticed in restaurants that any number kept their “ball caps” on when they ate. They often talked with their mouths full, and did not place their eating utensils in recommended places. It was true, too, that waiters and some waitresses often referred to their male customers as “guys” or “buddies.” I dislike being referred to as a guy, and I certainly was not one particular waiter’s “buddy.” On the other hand, I have not objected to waitresses calling me “honey” or “darling.” Others have objected to it. I guess I have been called that all of my life by some women in my life and I enjoy the familiarity. An amazing example of this kind of familiarity was that in an elegant restaurant in Birmingham AL, a waiter repeatedly called my colleague and I “buddy.”

In the same way there is no respect in conversations shown to people who are due respect because they are either older, more learned or due more respect because of their position of authority. For the most part children are not taught to show respect, so their responses to adults are “yeah” or “yes” and “naw” or simply “no.” I have also noticed that children in our part of the country will get in line first at a buffet dinner or covered dish supper even when they are not accompanied by their parents. In my youth, we children ate last. I was always hungry and was sure that they would eat all of the good food up before I got to the table. There was a country music song that Lil’ Jimmy Dicken’s sang called *Take a Cold Tater and Wait*. That was the story of my childhood especially at large family gatherings. In conversations, children now interrupt their parents even though it is obvious they are engaged in conversations with someone else. Few people hold the door open for a lady or older person coming behind them. Then, too, I have not seen a man rise on a bus and give a woman or an older person his seat in years.

Manners seem to have gone out of the window in spite of Miss Manners’ newspaper column and numerous books on manners. For some reason people simply do not want to display social graces anymore.

Manners or etiquette has its origin in primitive societies. Even the most primitive of societies have rules of behavior that are designed to demand civility and right behavior.

These became more formalized when kings and nobles were the primary rulers of peoples. In the 1600's and 1700's they came under the influence of the church and were further expanded. In Britain they were further reinforced by a person named Beau Brummel – a British dandy who established rules for dress in his day. In our day such persons as Amy Vanderbilt and Emily Post have written rules of etiquette that are accepted as authoritative.

I am certain that the deterioration of general etiquette all started in the 60's with the rejection of the rules of social behavior that existed before WWII. The youth of the 60's decided to reject all that had been part of our culture from its beginning. This included good manners of any kind. These rules of behavior and the manners that went with them were part of our inheritance from the original settlers and founders of our country. Such a statement is supported by the observation that our first president at the age of 16 recorded "Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation." George Washington apparently realized that the society of his day demanded civility and decent behavior so he wrote out the rules he thought a gentleman should follow. President Washington had apparently been "to the manner born" so it is not surprising that he should have written these rules.

Young Washington wrote 110 rules and they covered almost everything we would consider good manners today. He began by saying that every action done in company should be with some sign of respect to those that are present. We can presume he meant by this that one should greet them affably and not have a haughty demeanor. His second rule was that one should not put his hands in places that are considered private. He phrased it this way, "Put not your hands to any part of the body not usually discovered." He also asked that if a person had to sneeze, sigh, or yawn they were to do it privately and not speak while they were yawning, but put their handkerchief before their face, and turn their face aside. If you were standing before the fire you were to give your place to a person who had just come in from the cold.

When a person was sitting they were to keep their feet firm without putting one before the other or crossing them. You were not to shift around or gnaw your nails. People were not to shake their head, feet or legs and were not to roll their eyes or lift one eyebrow above the other, and if they were close to the person and speaking they were not to "bedew" another's face with spittle by approaching too near him. People were not to turn their backs to others especially when speaking, nor were they to "jog" the table on which another was reading or writing. He did not think a person should drum with their fingers or feet nor should they hum in the presence of others. He also noted that a person's nails should be kept short and clean and that his hands and teeth also were to be kept clean. As for clothes he felt they should be kept clean, unripped and brushed at least once a day. Dress was to be modest and designed to accommodate nature rather than to procure admiration. He felt that a person should "keep to the fashion of their equals such as are civil and orderly with respect to times and places.

Washington wrote of table manners at great length. He had seventeen rules that applied to eating, but I shall only list the ones I thought were most important. First he said that a person was not to cough or spit or blow their nose while eating unless it was absolutely necessary. One was not to "make a show of great delight in their victuals." "Feed not in

greediness,” he said, and they should not cut their bread with a knife, nor were they to find fault with the food. They were not to lean on the table with their body or arms, but to only put their hands on the table. He noted that they were not to take salt or cut bread with a greasy knife and if they were soaking their bread in the sauce they were to take no more than they could put in their mouths at one time. Blowing on broth was also not good manners – one should let it cool naturally. A person was not to put meat in his mouth with his knife and was not to spit any stones of his fruit on his plate or throw them under the table. It seemed that keeping one’s fingers clean was desirable by wiping them on the corner of their napkin. It was proper to swallow a mouthful of food before putting another bite in. Morsels were not to be too big for their mouth. Drinking with the mouth full of food was also not to be done. Drinking should not be too hasty or too slow. Before and after drinking they were to wipe their lips and not make a great noise. Persons should not clean their teeth with their napkin, fork or knife, but were to use a toothpick. He felt that the “chiefest in company” should unfold his napkin and eat first, but he should allow the slowest in the company enough time to eat. One was not to go to the head of the table unless they had a reason to do so.

His rules for relationships were quite clear. When greeting someone one should not use superfluous comments or “affectation of ceremony.” One should take off his hat to persons of distinction, such as noblemen, justices, churchmen, bowing more or less according to the custom of the “better bred and quality of the person.” “Among your equals do not expect that they should be the first to take off their hats, but take yours off as you feel led and be not affected in your salutations. If anyone comes to speak to you while you are seated, stand up even though he be your inferior.” When assigning seats one should place persons according to their “degree.” When a person met a person of greater quality they were to stop and step out of their way especially in a doorway or any limited space to let them pass. When walking with another, the person of greater quality should be on the right. When three were walking they should be in the middle. If you were lodging with some one and they were of high estate, older or of greater merit you were not to accept an offer of superior accommodations. To one that is equal to, you should offer them your bed, but they should refuse it until you offer it a second time.

Washington continued to emphasize the respect that was due to persons older, holding positions of responsibility, or clergy. This included giving them due “title.” In conversation we should not speak louder than ordinary. We are not to strive in argument with our superiors, but to be modest in our argumentation. With our equals we should not try to teach them anything about their area of expertise. He also made an interesting comment about visiting the sick, when he said that a person should not “play the physician,” nor should anyone express joy to a person who is sick or in pain. Everyone was to be treated with dignity and when a person fails at a task, but has tried hard, we should not blame him. If we are to advise or reprehend anyone we should do it with “sweetness and kindness.” In response to admonitions we are to receive them thankfully, but if we are not culpable we should in private let the person who admonishes us know that we are not guilty. We are not to mock or jest at anything of importance, and are not to laugh at our own humor. Our conversation is to be without malice or envy for that is a sign of a “tractable nature.” In all causes of passion we should let reason govern and not emotion. We are not to utter base and frivolous things among men of learning, nor difficult questions, bring up

subjects, or mention things hard to believe among the ignorant. Don't talk too much at any time. We are not to utter injurious words or scoff at anyone although they may make themselves vulnerable. Do not give advice when it is not asked for. When another person is talking be attentive, and do not disturb the audience, prompt him, or answer him till his speech has ended. Do not talk too fast but speak in an orderly and distinct way. Do not point your finger at the person you are discoursing with and don't get too close to him. Young Washington also said that we are not to make comparisons, or commend someone else when a person had been commended. One excellent bit of advice was not to be tedious in your discourse. When your superiors are talking to anyone do not speak or laugh. Finally he had a rule that we should have our carriage (posture and facial expression) to be grave, settled and attentive.

I have paraphrased what I considered to be the most important of Washington's rules. I did so because it was apparent that at the age of 16 he was fully aware of the necessity of manners in our social activities. There is little emphasis on manners in today's society. My second son has 6 children and he and his wife have endeavored to teach them manners. They have done a great job by today's standards, but there are little things that are mannerly that I do not see them do. For instance they do not open the door of the car for their mother or grandmother, nor do they help them seat themselves at the table. They do not ask their guests to go first in the serving line at a buffet. There is some respect for age and superior status but this is inconsistent. All of my other grandchildren who live in the south are being taught to say "yes sir" and "no sir" or "yes ma'am" or "no ma'am," but those who live in New England do not. They know the difference because my grandson who lives in Boston was telling a friend of his who was moving to Georgia that he had to use those terms because he was moving to the South. "That's what they do down there," he said.

I grew up with continual instruction in manners. It was important to my mother that we have good manners. I remember the lesson she gave me on how to behave when I had my first date. Open doors for her, pull her chair out at the dinner table and help her get seated. Always walk on the outside when you are walking. Mother reminded me to take her elbow as I walked up the steps, and never go ahead of her. If I was at the table eating I was to keep one hand in my lap and eat with the other or with both as needed. I was to place my knife on the upper edge of my plate if it was not being used, and when I finished eating I was to place them side by side across the middle of my plate. She insisted that when I finished eating I was to fold my napkin neatly and place it beside my plate. As I did not want to be a boor I did all those things and my date liked my behavior. I do not remember what else mother said but those stuck in my mind and I practice them today.

Unfortunately mother did not instruct me on conversation skills, therefore, I had a tendency to do many of the things that George Washington ruled against. I would often interrupt people and I had a tendency to be harshly critical of people with whom I differed. All I learned as a child was that "Children are to be seen and not heard." I resented that admonition. When I grew older and used alcohol I found that I talked too much and my criticism grew too passionate. This alienated many of the people with whom I was associated, so I finally learned to measure my conversation and say things that built people up and did not tear them down. But I had a lot of embarrassing experiences before I learned not to be critical. I know why I did this. Mother was a harshly critical person and I had simply copied her. Since she did not know or obey rules of conversation she could not

teach me. She did, though, teach me to say “Please” and “Thank you.” Emily Post says that everyone likes to be appreciated and that “Thank you” is an accepted way of showing appreciation. “Please” turns a demand into a request. Humans do not like to be commanded to do things. Their free will causes them to resist commands. I would add that the human will does not tolerate the imposition of another will above its own. It only responds when an appeal is made to that will. Interestingly God knew this for in Deuteronomy 28 he laid out the consequences of our obeying or disobeying his commandments. Then in Deuteronomy 30:11-19 He makes this appeal, “Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them. I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. **Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.**” I have to admit that I sometimes forget his admonition today.

George Washington did not comment on greeting remarks, but it is well to greet people with a cheerful “Good morning” or a cheerful “Hello” and if you know them, call them by name. If they are your superior you should use either a Mr., Miss, Mrs, or title and their surname. When we are greeted we should respond with an appropriate greeting.

All of us should have respect for a person’s privacy. One of my greatest gripes today is the use of cell phones in public places. If I am sitting in a restaurant someone at a nearby table may make or receive a phone call and talk loudly over my conversation with my companion(s). They are a horrible distraction and an invasion of my privacy. We should ban phone calls in such places. Instead many public places are a giant phone booth. Yesterday at lunch I saw five cell phones in use at the same time in the restaurant where my colleague and I were dining. Fortunately none of them were close to us. When we do use the telephone we should have good manners. If we are going to make a cell phone call or receive one, we should go into a quiet place and complete the call. As for office telephones I am a stickler for good phone manners. Years ago I ran a large laboratory and I noticed that those who answered the phone were at times not very polite. I checked with our local phone company and found that they had a film that instructed office workers on how to use the phone. I called all my employees together and had them watch the film. There was a noticeable change in their phone manners after that. They were very respectful and polite when they made or received a call thereafter. All they needed was some instruction. We should without question not intrude into the privacy of our children and they should be taught not to intrude into ours.

I have had a few negative experiences trying to be mannerly. On one occasion I held the door open for a woman on the Duke University campus and was rewarded with the

comment that I was a “Chauvinist Pig.” “You are welcome,” I replied and excused her in my mind by believing that she had just come from a women’s studies class. There have been others in the same vein, but for the most part people appreciate good manners.

A retired school teacher, who I work out with at the Duke Center for Living, made a few comments about manners this morning when I asked her what she thought about manners. She taught Spanish for 47 years in the public schools, and more recently in a Christian school. I began our conversation by cheerfully saying I was glad to be there. We passed a few other pleasantries and I found that she knew one of my former secretaries. She had heard of me through her. I then asked her what she thought about the manners of the modern generation. She was less than complimentary. I then asked her to give me some examples of bad manners that she saw in our society. She started by saying that we saw them everywhere. She like me objected to loud conversations on cell phones in public places, poor table manners and hats and caps. She said men used to take their hats off in the elevators for women, but they don’t anymore. They wear their caps at the table when they are eating. They do not take them off indoors or when engaged in conversation. She did make a comment on one area of manners that I had not thought about. It was about highway driving etiquette. She was particularly incensed when there is construction on a multilane highway and people have to merge into two or one lane(s). Most drivers move to the traffic lane(s) fairly early, but there are always a few who race right up to the merge arrow and then expect to be let into the traffic lane. I have to admit that this irritates me too. Then there are the drivers who race up and down the highway at 90 miles an hour and weave in and out, sometimes crossing over two or three lanes never slowing down. They are a real driving hazard. Then there are those who follow too close for miles and miles. When they do this they worry us. Even when the opportunity exists for them to pass, they just hang on our back bumper compounding our anxiety.

My school teacher friend made one other comment that pleased me. She said that the students she now had in the Christian school had excellent manners. “They are so sweet and easy to teach,” she said. “They are not loud and boisterous, they are obedient when you give them commands, and they really make you work to satisfy their thirst for knowledge. I asked her if this was in contrast to the public school she had taught in. She replied with an emphatic yes! It seems that Christian parents still teach their children to mind their manners.

In this discussion I have tried to briefly discuss the subject of manners. Manners grow out of a desire to show respect for other people. I have asked my colleague Larry Willett to write a few words about respect to complete this discussion.

Respect-Teaching Biblical Values, by Larry Willett, Ph.D.

Just moments ago, as I prepared to write this article, I watched grisly scenes of bodies of human beings, several of them infants and children, being pulled from a demolished bus in Israel. One casualty was a mother in her last trimester of pregnancy. The total absence of respect for human life demonstrated in atrocities such as this is deeply disturbing. Yet, such disturbing events are becoming a daily occurrence in our world. Nearly as disturbing are reports in local newspapers and on television of assaults of students on teachers, husbands on wives, and parents on their children.

Having watched these reports from Israel and Iraq for a few minutes, I changed the channel and listened to a judge in Alabama stand his ground against the federal government's decision to force the removal of the Ten Commandments from an Alabama Courthouse. He voiced great regard for the Ten Commandments, emphasizing the fact that our Constitution, indeed, our nation, was founded on trust in God, reliance on unchanging values, and respect for all persons. I was angered by the female commentator's rudeness and disrespect as she interviewed the judge, interrupting him several times when he attempted to explain the value of this important and historic document to our nation in these modern times.

Respect, as is true with most values, is first modeled and taught at home. The writer in the Old Testament exhorted parents to teach these values (laws) around the clock. Clearly, in our modern world there is an assault upon the concept of unchanging values. By attempting to discredit the source of these values, the Word of God, values become relative rather than reliable, temporary rather than eternal.

In both the Old and New Testament, the word "respect" is most often associated with the idea of honoring another. To honor a person is to acknowledge their high value in some meaningful and demonstrative way. Therefore, to disrespect a person is to dishonor them, to, in our eyes, lower their value as a person. Leviticus Chapter 19: 3 and 32 teaches the honoring of mothers and the elderly, respectively. In Malachi 1:6, the Lord chastises the priests for showing disrespect and contempt for his name by placing defiled food on His altar. In so doing, they had failed to show to the Lord Almighty the respect due his Name.

I Thessalonians teaches that we are to honor those who work hard. First Peter 2:17 exhorts us to "show proper respect and honor to everyone." In our lives there are countless ways in which we have opportunities to honor people. Within our own homes, we honor our spouses by saying and doing things that communicate to them that we value them. Husbands honor their wives by doing helpful things for them, by affirming their value verbally, through affection (without expecting something in return), and quality time. Wives show respect for their husband by speaking well of him with others, by encouraging him and responding to him sexually and in other ways. Parents respect their children by supporting and encouraging their endeavors such as sports, music, academics, and other interests. Josh McDowell pointed out that children spell the word love (from their parents) this way, "T-I-M-E". Employees honor their employer by giving their best effort whether s/he is watching or not. Similarly, employees feel honored when an employer communicates that they are valuable individuals, not just "human resources" to be managed.

There is no greater model of respect of persons than that demonstrated by the life of Jesus. He honored the leper, shunned by the world, with a healing touch. The Samaritan woman at the well, though she was a gentile and a female, was treated with respect by Jesus when he stopped to talk with her about "living water". When Mary, the prostitute, entered the room and washed Jesus' feet with her tears, he honored her in front of the cold-hearted Pharisees.

Whether in our homes, in the market place, in a classroom, or on the street, we have daily opportunities to demonstrate respect, just as Jesus did. In a world where individuals are regularly devalued, we have an opportunity to leave them with the feeling of having

encountered Christ, the “Word Made Flesh.”