

## A Culture Of Incivility

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*“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful”* (1 Corinthians 13:4f). In many ways, this year’s round of political campaigns has highlighted a growing problem in our country: a trend toward rudeness. This is not to say that everybody has slumped into the bottom rung of the ladder of civility, but as a society we are becoming progressively more rude. A recent study was outlined by Dr. P.M. Forni of Johns Hopkins University, who asserts that 80 percent of Americans believe that incivility is a national problem. Nearly the same percentage think rudeness has gotten worse in the last ten years.

So what has become of us? What can Christians do to help calm down our neighbors, co-workers, and family members when rudeness seems to have gripped them? More importantly, we must consider our own conduct and ensure that we are not contributing to the problems, but seeking a solution. *“So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good”* (1 Peter 2:1f).

### Excuses That We Make

The sad reality is that if somebody wants to be rude, there will always be plenty of excuses for him or her. The fuel is always there, for we live in a fallen world permeated with sin. *“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel...”* (James 4:1f). It becomes very easy for us to justify our incivility under conditions that we deem less than ideal:

- Feeling victimized gives us a sense of misplaced righteous indignation, as if two wrongs do, in fact, make a right. “Yeah, well, he did it first” becomes the rallying cry of the perpetual victim. Remember, however, what Paul writes, *“Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people”* (Romans 12:17-21). He will go on to say that vengeance is God’s, and that we must overcome evil with good;
- Stress seems to be another common excuse people make. “Well, I only have a temper when I’m stressed” or “That’s just how I get after a long day at work.” During a slumping economy it seems that rudeness comes quite naturally to people. What we need to realize, however, is that a bad economy, a lost job, a chaotic or frightening political election, or a difficult medical problem do not excuse sinful attitudes. Many others throughout history have endured the same trials and remained faithful, loving, and compassionate (Job, David, Paul, and our Lord Jesus Christ all come to mind);
- Rudeness is often justified because of a belief that it is the only way to get one’s point across. This would be the kind of banter seen at Town Hall Meetings that are nothing but shouting matches, religious debates that become character attacks, and conflicts between spouses. Unfortunately, escalating anger usually

has the opposite effect of convincing our opponents: *“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger”* (Proverbs 15:1);

- Also, much of our culture’s rudeness is veiled in humor, as if a joke gives us permission to say and do anything. Perhaps the most foul part of our society is its admiration of comedians. For the last half-century, the digression of comedy provides undeniable evidence of our country’s deepening tolerance of rudeness and vulgarity. The further the boundary is pushed by comedians (as well as sitcoms, movies, and internet humor), the more everybody indulges in base subjects. Always remember, though, that humor is not a valid excuse for treating another human being with disdain: *“Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows and death, so is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, ‘Was I not joking?’”* (Proverbs 26:18-19)