

How To Be Civil In An Uncivil World

Rich Nathan

April 25-26, 2015

God, I Have a Question Series

James 3.9-18

How many of you believe that America is becoming ruder and cruder? If you raised your hand, you are in the majority in America. Two-thirds of all Americans of every age, millennials, Gen-Xers, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation, across the board believe that incivility in America has risen to crisis levels.

Just last week the manager of the Cincinnati Reds was screaming at reporters when he let loose with a torrent of F-bombs. Someone counted his use of this curse word and it was 77 times during his rant. He cursed in almost every sentence for five straight minutes. And this profanity-laced rant wasn't during a private meeting with his team after some egregious offense. That would have been bad enough. This x-rated rant was in public with reporters where he knew that everything he said would be recorded and published.

We're living in a time where civility is being destroyed.

The destruction of civility

Every time we turn on the TV people are screaming at each other. Politicians and newscasters have particularly contributed to the lack of civility in our country. Watch this segment of so-called news with me. This is what passes for reasoned political debate in the 21st century.

VIDEO – News Segment

Even in less heated exchanges reporters are constantly interrupting the person they're interviewing, speaking over them, shouting at them, badgering, and hectoring them. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, who used to have 2 or 3 hour thoughtful debates, are rolling over in their graves. Talk about a dumbed-down political system. Our so-called debates about the great issues of our day are a cross between Big Time Wrestling combined with dog-fighting.

And Americans believe that the Internet, in particular, encourages uncivil behavior. 74% of millennials, folks between the ages of 18 and 34, believe that social media encourages uncivil behavior.

How many of you are familiar with the term doxing?

Doxing

I was unfamiliar with it until about six months ago. It is a brand new term that comes from a spelling alteration of docs or documents. What it refers to is compiling and releasing someone's personal documents and information. Typically, this happens to a person who shares an unpopular opinion in a newspaper or on the Internet. So what a doxer does is compile all this personal information about the individual – a picture of their home, their home address, their cell phone number, pictures of their kids, where their kids go to school, their places of employment, their email address – and then they publish all this personal information online. It is the ultimate revenge tactic designed to make someone feel vulnerable and to stifle speech that a particular group doesn't like.

And then, of course, online there is the older practice of trolling.

Trolling

Almost every female editorial writer has been the victim of trolls. What does a troll do? They tweet or post something on your Facebook page designed to provoke your reaction or disgust or fear. One feminist editorial writer said that trolls were posting things like "You're too ugly to rape" and "Your father Paul West found you disgusting." Her father had died of cancer the year before.

Civility is breaking down everywhere as drivers pull bumper to bumper, blaring their horns, and giving each other the finger. And as everyone in politics has been labeled at one time or another "the new Hitler." Even we Christians are rallied by fund-raising appeals to go to war against the forces of unbelief. Into this mess, followers of Christ have something healing and positive to bring to the social fabric of our community and our country.

I've been doing a series since Easter dealing with some of the hot-button issues that are facing our world today; topics that are often avoided in church. Next week we'll be talking about how should Christians relate to Muslims? In a few weeks, I will be doing a message on how should Christians relate to the LGBT community? Today, as I continue in this series, "God, I Have a Question," I've called my message "How To Be Civil In An Uncivil World." Let's pray.

What does civility actually mean? What does it mean to be civil?

The definition of civility

What does civility mean? Civility is public politeness. It simply means that we display tact, moderation, and good manners towards people who are different than us, or with whom we disagree. Civility is not just public, it is internal. Civility is a heart-commitment

in which we want to see other people flourish. With civility we're talking about basic respect for others, respecting other people at high-priced restaurants enough that you don't ruin their meal by coming in from the gym wearing gym shorts and a tank top where they can see the hair of your armpits. You don't walk into a fancy restaurant wearing flip flops showing your dirty feet. Civility is simply the respect we owe each other. Because, as we're going to find out, every human being even those we disagree with are made in the image of God.

So when we display good manners, it is not just a fancy social nicety, trying to recreate Downton Abby for the 21st century. Good manners, being courteous, being civil is the way we build community. Incivility destroys community.

Let's talk about the ingredients of civility. I want to read with you a passage from the book of James. James 3:9-18.

James 3:9–18 (NIV)

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. 11 Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 12 My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. 14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

The context of these verses is communication. James begins chapter 3 by discussing with us the high standards to which teachers in the church are held. James 3:1 has often created fear in me.

James 3:1 (NIV)

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

And then James talks about the power of our speech. In v. 9, James gives us the first demand of civility.

The demands of civility

James 3:9 (NIV)

9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness.

Civility demands honor

Why should we treat other people with respect, even people we really disagree with? Because every human being is made in the image of God; the atheist, whose blog makes your blood boil as she pours out venom against Christians; the racist who says on TV that the white race is the superior race and whites deserve to rule; or old Fred whose lying drunk in a doorway and reeks of alcohol – every human being is made in the image of God.

What James is expressing in v. 9 is the incongruity, the duplicity, the hypocrisy of blessing God our Father and with the same tongue cursing men and women who are made in his image.

To illustrate, imagine you are invited into the White House to have a chat with the President in the Oval Office. To his face you are really flattering. You say really nice things to him during your conversation with him. And then you go out on Pennsylvania Avenue and in front of the White House there is a big poster picture of the President. As you look at it, you pull out a can of spray paint from your backpack or purse and you scrawl over the President's face the word "Jerk!"

James says that's what you are doing, follower of Christ, when you come and say nice things to God in worship. You flatter God to his face telling him how great he is, how thankful you are, how much you love him. And then you leave worship and you see his image in the face of your ex, or a politician on TV who you dislike, or a Facebook post that makes you mad, or a coworker who irritates you, and you curse them under your breath. James says that's the height of hypocrisy. Whenever you curse a human being it's like you're spray painting the word "Jerk" over the face of Jesus Christ.

There is a second demand of civility.

Civility demands modesty

James 3:13 (NIV)

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

It is really important for Christians like everyone else to display modesty and humility in our tone when we speak. Is there anything more of a turn off to you than when someone talks down to you? When someone has that condescending tone in which

they treat you like you are an idiot? So much of the turn-off that people experience when they're talking with Christians especially about something controversial is not the content of what we say, but the tone in which we say it – the haughtiness, self-superiority, the absolute impossibility that anyone with half a brain would hold the position that they do, the unwillingness to listen.

Listen, we all see through a glass darkly. Part of the demand of civility is that you and I not pretend to know more than we do, or pretend we've experienced more than we have, or that we behave better than we do. Modesty – just simple modesty as we speak is part of civility.

Here is the third demand of civility. Awareness.

Civility demands awareness

James 5:9 (NIV)

9 Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

It is incredibly helpful to remind ourselves when we're online and firing off sarcastic tweets, or an angry comment on someone's Facebook page, or when we're in an argument in our homes, or at the ticket counter at the airport that everything we say and everything we write is done in the presence of God. God is always watching what we write. God is always listening to what we say.

I remember hearing the theologian Miroslav Volf talking about his practice when he's writing about someone whose views he strongly disagrees with. He says when he is writing a criticism of some opponent's views, he always pictures in his mind's eye that person sitting across the table while he is writing. Would he say the same things and use the same tone, if he was face to face with the person? It is so easy to push the send button on an angry email because we're not seeing one another. But Volf said he doesn't only picture the other person sitting across the table while he writes, but he also pictures Jesus leaning over his shoulder reading what he is saying.

Do you think you'd write the same things online, if you had Jesus looking over your shoulder? The reality is, he is!

Civility demands an awareness of God. We're always speaking and writing in God's presence. God is always watching what we write and listening to what we say.

Now there is in many circles a distortion of civility.

The distortion of civility

Martin Marty, the church historian, observed that one of the real problems of contemporary life is that

The people who are good at being civil often lack strong convictions and people who have strong convictions often lack civility.

I like that way of stating the issue. There is a false spectrum.

Uncivil	Civil
Conviction	Moral Relativism

For some people, when you start talking about civility, what they mean is that you must approve of what everyone else believes and does and that all opinions are equally valid. This is particularly true in inter-religious dialogue. Sometimes in inter-religious dialogue there is this implicit requirement that in order for us to be civil with each other, in order for a Christian to engage in civil dialogue with a Muslim, or with a Jew, the price of admission for that conversation is that we lay aside what is distinctive about our Christian faith, the claim that God stepped into this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who died on a cross for our sins, and rose from the dead for our salvation. That we need to, as the price of admission for civil discussion, lay aside all the things that we deeply hold like Christ's sinless incarnation, his saving work on the cross and his resurrection, and we just talk about the things we agree about together. That there is one God and that this one God is the Creator and the origin of everyone.

It is not uncivil to share our beliefs with conviction. I like the term that the former President of Fuller Seminary used in expressing this idea. He said the kind of civility we need in the 21st century is

Convicted civility

It is really important that when we talk about civility that we recognize that civility is not enough in our communication. What we need is convicted civility. Because we live in a time where any claim of truth is seen as offensive and sometimes oppressive. If you claim, for example, as Jesus claimed, that faith in him is necessary for salvation, someone will say "That claim offends me. That claim, that truth claim is oppressive. You're being intolerant to claim that one needs to put their trust in Jesus to be saved."

Maybe you feel that way.

Friends, making a truth claim is not intolerant. For example, if you claim that the Ohio State Buckeyes beat Oregon in the National Championship game 42-20.

PHOTO – Ezekiel Elliott running in for a TD

You are not being intolerant by making this truth claim. It would be absurd if someone said, “You know, when you said that OSU beat Oregon for the National Championship there were a number of Oregonians who were really offended by your statement. Can’t you say that for Ohio State fans the Buckeyes won, but for Oregon Duck fans, Oregon won? Can’t you say, for the sake of civility, that both teams won, or that neither team won, or even that football doesn’t exist?”

It is not uncivil to claim that the God who made everything stepped into the world as Jesus Christ. That Jesus went around doing good and healing people, revealing to this world God’s heart of mercy. This perfect person, Jesus of Nazareth, was rejected by people. He was hung on a cross where he died. But that his death turned out to be God’s plan for our salvation. God raised him from the dead and through him opened up a way for all of us to come into relationship with God and that billions of people have met God through Jesus. For the sake of civility, we can’t claim that these things aren’t true.

Let me just say this. So many followers of Christ struggle with how to communicate their Christian faith in an environment where faith conversations are really unwelcome. A part of the lack of welcome, just a part, is that we Christians can become a little obnoxious and overbearing, when we think that our job is to convert someone else. We feel pressure on ourselves and we begin to pressure other people because we think our job is to convert other people, that it is our job to convert our spouses, or our family members, our fathers, mothers, brothers or sisters. Or it is our job to convert a girlfriend or boyfriend, or coworker, or our roommates. It is the Holy Spirit’s job to convert.

It is so much more helpful and less pressurized to understand that Christian witness is simply helping people acquire an accurate understanding of Christian faith. So that if a person rejects Christian faith, at least they’re not rejecting a caricature of Christians – that Christians are hate-filled, homophobes, or that Christians are all politically right-wing, or that Christians are anti-science, or whatever. The job of a Christian witness is to help people gain an accurate understanding of Christian faith so that if they reject it, at least they understand what they’re rejecting. And if they accept it, they know what they’re embracing.

Let me drill down here for just a moment. I’ve been talking about civility. I want to talk about the other side of the scale, convicted civility.

Convicted civility

There continually is the statement these days that it is arrogant to say that Jesus is the Savior, or that God came into the world in Jesus Christ. It is disturbing to many people, especially in the age of radical Islamists, who are cutting off people’s heads, to hear

anyone make a truth claim about their particular religion. It is disturbing and viewed by some as downright dangerous. Some folks say

All religions should be banned

We hear this over and over again. The greatest barrier to world peace is religion. Just read the comments section in the New York Times whenever one of the editorial writers says something positive about religion or something positive about Christianity. Hundreds of people respond with vitriol. Religion is positively dangerous. All religions should be banned. Imagine no religion, as John Lennon sang, then we would all live life in peace.

But of course we have empirical evidence that that's not true. Where religion has been banned in the former Soviet Union and Communist China, and in Cambodia, and in a different way in Nazi Germany, where regimes around the world have determined to tightly control religious practice, the result was not people living together lives of peace and harmony. There was more oppression.

Alister McGrath wrote this in his History of Atheism,

The 20th century gave rise to one of the greatest and most striking paradoxes of human history: that the greatest intolerance and violence of that century was practiced by those who believed that religion caused intolerance and violence.

Some say, "Well, maybe we shouldn't ban all religion. Maybe that's too heavy-handed. But

All religions teach the same thing

I was a Comparative Religion major as an undergrad along with being a history major. All a person would need to do is to take one introductory Comparative Religion class and you would find out on the first day that all religions do not teach the same thing. That at the most basic level religions conflict on what we teach about God. Most Buddhists don't believe in a personal God at all. Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that God is one. Muslims and Jews believe that Jesus is not God. And Christians claim Jesus is God. All religions don't teach the same thing.

Well, Rich, you are entitled to your convictions about your Christian faith. But let's be honest and say that

All religions are products of your upbringing

You just believe that because you were raised that way. If you were raised in Algeria, you would be a Muslim. If you were raised in China, you would be an atheist. Now, this

particular objection doesn't really apply to me. I was raised in a Jewish family where we normally used Jesus Christ as a curse word. Now there is no doubt that our upbringing does affect us and what we believe. There is no doubt about that. But to the person who says that all religious beliefs are socially conditioned, that it's just a product of your upbringing, we would respond and say that even that belief that all religions are a product of your upbringing, even that belief is a product of your upbringing. You would not think that way, if you grew up in Saudi Arabia. But because you grew up in an irreligious home somewhere in the secular West, or heard lectures from irreligious philosophy professors, or sociology professors, you think that way.

In other words, no one can say all beliefs are socially conditioned except my beliefs. What we need today is not conviction-less civility, or uncivil conviction, we need convicted civility – people who approach the world with convictions. But folks who communicate their convictions with kindness and gentleness and modesty. Or as James puts it in James 3:17-18:

James 3:17–18 (NIV)

17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

I like the way this is expressed in The Message version of the Bible which is a Christian paraphrase. Here is what it says:

Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoys its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

Convicted civility. I want to close with this. How is convicted civility demonstrated?

The demonstration of civility

Use your online presence to be salt and light. We certainly have an opportunity to practice civility online. If you are a follower of Christ, why not bring your Christian witness online? Invite people to Vineyard. Tweet a sermon quote. Be warm and winsome! Stop bashing the other side politically.

James talks about being peaceable. I was reading about the Constitutional Convention back in the late 1780's, the convention that produced the United States Constitution. For four months men met in a room in Philadelphia hammering out the US Constitution. It was hot in that room; the windows were closed. Men were coming from all across the

13 colonies with different backgrounds, different religious viewpoints, different economic interests and they engaged in arguments about what the future of the US Government should be like.

What is remarkable is that in the midst of this robust debate about what this new government should be like, the conversation was incredibly civil. One reason that it was so civil is that people after the day of debate would go out for a meal together. They were boarding in the same boarding houses all over Philadelphia. They had relationship that enabled them, despite their different beliefs and viewpoints, to maintain a peaceable, civil tone as they argued. Folks from New England with Puritan backgrounds being civil towards plantation owners from the South, who were not Christian at all. As they ate together, and spent time together, these very different men became unlikely friends.

I love stories of unlikely friendships.

VIDEO – Unlikely Friends

Let me close with a couple of stories.

A guy by the name of Shane Windmeyer, a gay activist blogger, wrote an article two years ago in which he said:

I spent New Year's Eve at the red-blooded, All-American, epicenter of college football: at the Chik-fil-A Bowl next to Dan Cathy, the President of Chik-fil-A, as his personal guest. It was one of the most unexpected moments of my life.

Shane Windmeyer says,

Like most LGBT people, I was angered by Dan's public opposition to marriage equality. My organization, Campus Pride, has been on the ground with student leaders protesting Chik-fil-A at campuses all over the country for years.

But in August 2012 he got a surprising call from Dan Cathy, the President of Chik-fil-A. This led to more calls, more conversations, the exchange of a bunch of texts. Dan had never had conversations before with someone from the LGBT community. Shane said,

Dan Cathy was awkward at the beginning, but he was always really genuine and kind.

Over the course of time, they forged the most unlikely friendship. Dan Cathy, a Christian, and this gay activist, who said:

For months we shared respectful communication that built trust. Dan was always kind and open.

This gay activist said,

We learned to listen to one another, appreciate one another, to care about each other as human beings.

I read another story of an orthodox Rabbi who was at an inter-religious dialogue. He met this Imam. This orthodox Rabbi had been raised to be incredibly suspicious of Muslims. This Muslim Imam was raised to be incredibly suspicious of Jews. They had completely different views of Israel and Palestine. They could barely look at one another throughout this dialogue. A few months later the Rabbi gave the Imam a call. They began eating together and became friends. This started a series of meetings that have been going on for the last ten years between rabbis and Imams all over North America. Unlikely friends.

Let me ask you two questions in closing. Do you have an unlikely friend? If you want to practice civility, I mean really practice biblical civility, to be a source of healing in this broken world, to not contribute to the polarization and the shouting and the vitriol, but if you want to be a source of healing, of bringing people together, here is one question we can ask ourselves: Do I have an unlikely friend? Someone who knows where we're at, who knows what we are about, who is very different than us, yet they feel respected and valued and honored – because you know they're made in the image of God. Do you have an unlikely friend? If not, why not make an unlikely friend?

Here is the second question: Do you know what the most unlikely friendship was in all of history? God's friendship with us. Here is what we read in Romans 5.6-8:

Romans 5:6–8 (NIV)

6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

While we were enemies of God, Christ died for us. Let's pray.

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James 3.9-18

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