

Sermon 12 October 2025 Respect

James 3:1-6 Mark 12:28-34

This is such a well-known passage and needs very little explanation. However, I do want to take a glimpse at this passage in light of the theme of 'respect.' In this passage, Jesus talks to us about the importance of love – to love God and love your neighbour. If you think about it, it is nigh impossible to love anyone without respecting them. I cannot think of any situation where that might be the case. So what is respect?

Respect is honouring the worth or dignity in a person. It is acknowledging that a person, whoever they may be in any particular situation, is worthy of our attention. I quote from Romans 12:10, '*Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honouring each other.*'

I believe that respect is an innate need of being human. I believe that respect goes a long way towards defining love in the Christian sense. In our gospel reading, Jesus tells us that the two most important commandments are to love God and to love our neighbour. The two words I would use to define love in this sense are *care* and *respect*. As human beings our sense of self-worth, our sense of well-being come from feeling cared for and feeling respected for whom we are, no matter our faults.

I don't mind if someone tells me they disagree with me. Many do and I can by and large handle that. But if someone tells me that they have no respect for me, that would have to be the most hurtful and damning thing anyone could say to me.

When we use language that conveys a lack of respect, we hurt, we demean, we undermine a person's sense of well-being, their dignity. I have to ask myself, would I like to be spoken to in an unpleasant or condescending manner? The answer is 'no.' Then why on earth would I want to speak to someone in a similar way? This is precisely what Jesus meant when he directs us to 'love our neighbour as ourselves.' In other words, in the same way we would want to be treated. It is not rocket science, but all too often we get it wrong.

Conversely, when we praise or compliment someone, we enhance their dignity and their feeling of self-worth. We are showing them respect and so they feel valued.

There is the story of a young woman who was admitted to a retreat home as she was suffering from a lack of mental well-being. Susan was sad, struggling for motivation and it showed in her physical appearance. She had terrible skin and her posture reflected her negativity. A young orderly who worked there took notice of her. He could see that below the negative exterior there was a lovely person. He made a point of getting to know her, chatting with her. He learnt that in the eyes of her father, she could do nothing right. He constantly criticised her and never paid her a compliment, even though she was actually quite a talented young woman.

Susan's talent lay in music. She loved playing the piano. The young orderly encouraged her to play the piano in the home. He would sit there, listening to her playing and showering her with compliments. She started to sing as she played and before too long, she found herself singing throughout the day. Her whole attitude to life and, more importantly, to herself, changed. And it was reflected in the way she looked and carried herself. There was a spring in her step, her skin glowed and she learned to smile and laugh again. At long last, she felt valued and respected. Needless to say, they became a couple and eventually married.

The point is this, her transformation, her healing, came about not through the ministrations of counsellors but simply through the power of kind words. Never underestimate that power. The tongue can destroy, as it did with Susan. I quote from our first reading: '*The tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body.*' James 3:6. But it can also build up, heal and transform. Richard Orben, American comedy writer, puts it rather nicely: '*A compliment is verbal sunshine.*'

It is rather an unfortunate human failing that we do tend towards the negative rather than the positive. Author William Feather said, '*Everybody knows how to utter a complaint, but few can express*

a graceful compliment.’ So very true. When we praise and compliment, we are simply carrying out the Christian commandment ‘to love our neighbour.’ Again, it is something every single one of us can do.

The last point I want to make about respect is this – when you show respect to someone, you actually make a very important statement about yourself. I read this sometime ago, ‘There are those who see respect as something that is beneficial to the person on the receiving end, rather than something that is beneficial to the one who is giving the respect. But that is not quite correct, because the person who is capable of discerning respect and giving it to others, is the one who stands tall, if not taller.’ In other words, the virtue of respect enhances the person who gives it as much as the person who receives it.

And of course, it is just as relevant in reverse. In the end, those who demean others really only demean and disrespect themselves. Think about it – do you really look up to someone who is negative towards other people? Probably not. That is because negativity and the put down of others really says more about the perpetrator than anyone to whom that put down might be directed.

James makes a very good point in our first reading: *‘Indeed, we all make many mistakes. For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way.’* James 3:2. He makes the point that the way we speak to and about others says a great deal about ourselves.

I want to briefly allude to another issue which falls under the same umbrella, and that is the issue of gossip. I think it is one of the most common failings, to indulge in gossip. It panders to our insecurities because deep down we feel better about ourselves when we hear not so nice things about someone else.

Joseph Conrad, Polish-British novelist, said, *‘Gossip is what no one claims to like but everybody enjoys.’* There is the story of four ministers from a small town who were out fishing in a boat. The fish were not biting so they were chatting away. Since they had counselled their parishioners for many years that confession was good for the soul, they decided they would practise what they had been preaching. Each decided to confess a secret sin to the others.

The first said his great fault was language – sometimes he used profanity, when no-one was around, except God, of course. The second minister admitted his weakness was money. He was quite materialistic and would look for the parish that was going to financially benefit him the most. The third minister admitted to an addiction of petty gambling on anything from golf to football.

The last minister, who was the helmsman on their boat, had by this time turned the boat around and was heading for the shore. One of his fellow ministers asked him, ‘Why the hurry? And besides, you haven’t made your confession yet.’ To which the minister replied, ‘Well, you see, my sin is gossip, and I can’t wait to get home!’

The message here is that clergy get it wrong as much as anyone.