

Can Society Function Without Respect?

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“Men are respectable only as they respect,” as Ralph Waldo Emerson said (“Wise Old Sayings”). Respect goes beyond tolerance of diversity, even beyond acceptance; respect means both inclusion and empathy. Under no circumstances does respect involve abuse of another person. On the contrary, those who respect others will use the disparity between opposing beliefs to increase understanding and empathy. Too often, society creates barriers by ignoring or discouraging those who offer valuable input but diverge from the norm in abilities, experiences, and traits. In a respectful society, no person should be expected to undermine their own abilities or experiences while conforming to a standard set by someone else’s; one would be included and able to contribute to society regardless of identity. Thus, it is impossible for society to function without respect, to which the growth and success of a society is inextricably linked.

A society without respect is doomed to fall. Throughout history, civilizations have fallen and others have risen from their ashes; most relevant to Western culture are the Greek city-states, not only because of their influence on Western culture but because of the circumstances that led to their eventual defeat. The city-states of Greece each thought they were superior to the others. Due to the city-states’ inability to concede their point of view for a morally greater perspective and the citizens’ faith in their city-state no matter what it did, the squabbling Greeks were easily conquered (Pouwels). This is comparable to some American citizens’ dedication to their political party. Some citizens vote for or against a candidate simply because they are a Democrat or a Republican, regardless of their policy. Many have overreaching pride in their own party and fail to respect or see the value in some of the other party’s ideas, leading to violence at protests and

heated debates through social media. This lack of respect leads to chaos and division, and as John Dickinson said, “divided we fall.” (YourDictionary)

A society with one-sided respect will survive, but barely. Imagine a government where the subjects must respect the ruler, but the ruler has no regard for his subjects. The ruler, acting in his own interest, harms the subjects; the subjects lose respect for the ruler and rebel against him. The subjects become the new rulers; they claim superiority and lose all respect for their new subjects, and the cycle continues. This constant shift in government prevents the society from progressing at all. The usage of “subject” and “ruler” evoke the image of medieval England or another feudal state; however, this one-sided respect can be seen in the so-called American “democracy” of the late 18th and 19th centuries. Slaves were not given any political rights, and the rights of black Americans were strictly limited even after their emancipation; however, they were expected to serve and respect white Americans. In 1861, the Civil War began over the issue of slavery, dividing the nation and pitting brother against brother; this one-sided respect led to unstable lives for all.

A society built on mutual respect will thrive. In the 5th century BC, the Achaemenid Persians incorporated battle techniques from their enemies into their own empire (“The Achaemenid Empire at Its Largest”). Despite their differences in experiences and traits, the Persians recognized their enemies’ valuable contributions to war technology. The Achaemenid Persian empire was therefore successful; it was economically stable and politically unified, spanning from modern-day Bulgaria to Pakistan at its height, even allowing conquered territories to keep their own culture and retain their leadership (Cristian). Imagine what our society would look like if there was mutual respect between people of different abilities, genders, races, and classes. Those who did not have any experience with a problem would not value their solution

above that of someone with experience. Poverty would not be addressed solely as a product of laziness; respect for the hardworking poor would result in beneficial changes to the current economic system. Change for the better depends on mutual respect in society.

Societies cannot function without respect, and they cannot thrive with anything less than mutual respect. As humans began to claim more and more things as their own and only theirs, one-sided respect ran rampant. Those with resources, who therefore had more power, drowned out the voices of those without resources. Society can no longer exist in this way. We must aim for “fluid stability” - if we accept change for the better instead of resisting it, our society will not fracture. If we respect others, understanding that they may be able to ameliorate a problem more effectively than we can, our society will grow. Humanity is greater than an individual, greater than a family or even a country. Above anything else, we are humans, all deserving of respect.

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