

Character Trait for February in the City of Opelika: Civility

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The Character Trait for the month of February is “Civility”. The standard definition of the word is this: to show polite and courteous behavior towards others in one’s words and actions.

But isn’t true Civility more than being polite and courteous to others? My response to that would be that it absolutely is! Being polite and courteous to others are certainly outward signs of the person who has made respect for others an incorporated lifestyle choice; but it’s that “lifestyle choice” which truly defines civility of the heart and not just the behavior.

In truth, genuine civility is attained when one is not only polite and courteous to others in general, but also when one has made the deliberate choice of showing respect to someone, even when their actions don’t always make it easy to do so – i.e. like when someone calls us a name, or someone is rude to us, or a driver cuts us off on the highway.

Why should we work at being genuinely civil to one another? Because listening to the thoughts and opinions of others can help create genuine dialogue in our society of diverse viewpoints and lifestyles. And that helps to keep us all – well—*civilized*. Doing this does *not* mean that we are somehow sacrificing what we believe in, or somehow being untrue to our own value system. It does mean, though, that we recognize that others are entitled to their opinions; and that we have enough respect for them to listen, whether we agree with them or not. If civility is to prevail in our society, and our communities remain strong and healthy, it is imperative that we adults demonstrate to our children and grandchildren how to listen to the viewpoints of others and treat others with dignity as we work out a solution to our differing visions on “how things should be done”. And that means watching our words to, and about, others; controlling our actions; and learning how to become *proactive* in our behavior patterns instead of *reactive*.

Sadly, in a national survey conducted by Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate, in partnership with KRC Research in 2010, the results showed that most Americans (two out of three) believe that America has a major civility problem; and seven in 10 believe our civility towards one another has deteriorated over the past few years. When asked who they blamed the most: Politicians in general topped the list at 63%; Government Officials came in a close second with 57%; followed by America’s youth at 55%, the Media at 50% and Celebrities at 42%. Of those surveyed 81% believe that incivility is harming America’s future.

So how should we start the process of becoming more “civil” as individuals, a community, and a nation? According to Dr. P.M. Forni, in his book *Choosing Civility*, there are twenty five principles we can choose to incorporate into our lives – and then make sure we develop a concrete plan to help our children learn them as well. Some of those principles include:

1. Pay Attention to others
2. Listen

3. Be Inclusive
4. Speak Kindly
5. Don't Speak Ill
6. Respect Even a Subtle "NO"
7. Respect Others' Opinions
8. Respect Other People's Space
9. Apologize Earnestly
10. Don't Shift Responsibility and Blame

The best thing anyone can remember is that "civility" is a choice of the will. It includes the incorporation of the best of our thinking and behavior patterns so that the lines of communication remain open with others. There is very little we can do to change the behavior patterns of others; we can only make the deliberate choice to control and direct our own lifestyle so that we stay civil to those around us.

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