

Treating Women With Respect in a Catcalling Culture

You've probably seen the now viral YouTube video in which a woman walks through the streets of New York for 10 hours and gets more than 100 offensive catcalls from men. As she strolls down the busy sidewalks, guys of all ages yell, "What's up beautiful?" "Hey, baby!" and some words I can't print here.

One man wearing a white undershirt and baseball cap coos, "If I give you my number would you talk to me?"

That's creepy.

I have a friend in New York who says this type of sexual harassment is so common she refuses to walk to her office. Yet our society looks the other way when women are treated like meat in a butcher's window. Sometimes women's motives are questioned ("She wants the attention!") or, if her body is of a particular shape, she is blamed for men's offensive behavior.

I can't control what men say on the streets, and I don't think legislation will stop immature guys from acting like slobbering Neanderthals. But we can train brothers in the church to model a different attitude.

It's called respect. I learned it from my mother, who had me saying, "Yes ma'am," to women when I was 4 years old. (There are certain things about Southern culture that will never be outdated.)

When I mentor young guys today, I remind them that Jesus is very much concerned about the way they treat females. Here are the six rules I live by:

1. Treat women as members of your family. This was the rule

Paul gave Timothy in the first century when he outlined how ministers should relate to women in the church. We are to treat “older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim. 5:2). You wouldn’t rape your sister or flirt with her; nor would you make demeaning sexual comments about your mother. That means you don’t touch women inappropriately, abuse them verbally or make suggestive comments.

2. Train yourself to look at a woman’s heart, not her figure.

In our culture women often are objectified, as if their entire identity were about their breasts or other body parts. That’s stupid. A woman has God-given dignity: She has intellect, a unique personality, a sense of humor, talents, compassion and so many other special qualities. Learn to focus on those aspects and stop defining women by physical attributes.

3. Don’t blame a woman for your sexual weakness. I hear guys complaining that girls at church show too much cleavage or wear their pants too tight. Yes, that is a problem we can discuss at another time. But if a guy can’t control his libido when Delilah bats her eyelashes, how can he stand for holiness when Potiphar’s wife gets aggressive? Men, your responsibility is to show integrity and keep your pants zipped and your hands to yourself no matter how much temptation is thrown at you.

4. Don’t use your words to stir up sexual passion. We joke about silly Christian pick-up lines (“Last night I was reading the book of Numbers and I realized I didn’t have yours!”), but it’s no laughing matter if you are inappropriately using your words to stir up sexual desire in a woman. We are called to encourage each other, but pulling a woman aside at church and saying, “I’ve been noticing you for weeks, and I just feel so manly when I’m around you,” while stroking her shoulder, is out of bounds. The same goes for using subtle innuendo in comments on social media.

5. Respect sexual boundaries. Every guy should read the story

of Sarah in Genesis 12. Abraham lied about his wife's identity to Pharaoh, so the leader of Egypt decided to make a move on Sarah. Then God "struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues" (12:17), all because Pharaoh thought he could romance a woman whom God had especially set apart as a "princess" (see Gen. 17:15). She was off-limits! Consider yourself warned if you ever even think of crossing a boundary with one of God's daughters. That means hands-off. It also means no sexting, flirting, groping, seducing or date-raping.

6. Honor your marriage vows. When I got engaged to my wife, my mother gave me my grandfather's wedding band that he wore when he married my grandmother in the 1920s. I keep this antique ring prominently on my finger at all times. I want women to see it, and I talk about my wife in conversations to remind everybody that I am "taken." (I will also gladly show you her photo on my phone.) Any Christian man who flirts with women while hiding his marital status is picking a fight with God—and is in danger of a head-on collision with moral failure.

In this age of brazen catcalling, let's take the high road and drown out the chorus of cavemen. Let's show the world that men can treat women with dignity.

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