

Over the past few years, our society has continued its trend toward increased political polarization. A recent poll shows that nearly half of US voters believe those in the opposing political party are “downright evil.” As a result, the public square can be a volatile and even violent place to engage. This is something I experienced firsthand while working in the federal government from 2017 to 2018. In Washington, I observed two equally dehumanizing extremes: explicit hostility and deceptive politeness.

The politicians who most often make the news are those who are willing to trample anyone in their path to gain power. Others appear polished, poised, and polite — but their behavior masks ulterior motives. For example, one of my supervisors used our shared Christian faith to disarm and manipulate me. She would smile and invite me to pray with her at lunch, only for me to later discover she had been undermining me to our superiors.

My experience was so dispiriting that I fled politics and Washington altogether to write a book aimed at helping myself and others think more clearly about our deeply divided era and the ways we each might be part of resolving our crisis of polarization and dehumanization. Turning to Scripture and great thinkers of the past to help me process what I had endured, I reflected on this timeless question: *What respect do we owe each other by virtue of our shared humanity, beyond our differences and disagreements?*

The Bible reminds us that we were made for community with God and others, but we are also selfish and fallen. We thrive in cooperation but are always threatened by our inclination to put ourselves above others. As philosopher Blaise Pascal noted, “The more enlightened we are the more greatness and vileness we discover in man.” Likewise, Augustine’s concept of humanity’s “lust to dominate” explains that both overt hostility and false politeness arise from the self-love of our sinful nature rather than a love that sees and respects others as fellow persons created in God’s image.

I came to realize that our present division requires far more than mere courtesy or politeness. We need to usher in a new era of civility — a virtue that has been all but lost in our country. For Christians, civility is rooted in the *imago Dei* — the inherent dignity we all possess as beings created in God’s image. This foundation is crucial for flourishing across our differences today.

We must stop confusing civility with politeness. Politeness is a type of behavior with manners and etiquette. Civility is a virtue far deeper than mere conduct. Civility gets to the motivation of any given action.

Civility is a disposition that recognizes and respects the common humanity and the inherent dignity of other human beings. In doing so, civility sometimes requires that we act in ways that appear deeply impolite — engaging in robust debate that brings up meaningful differences. Jesus himself was not always polite, but he was continually civil. Civility never lets our disagreements devolve into dehumanization or violence.

Today, some Christians seek to overcorrect for what they think of as a culture of suffocating politeness by supporting leaders and pundits who exhibit a brash delight in delivering hard truths and puncturing hypocrisy. Yet this approach often ends up fostering hostility and aggression and falls prey to the same dehumanizing attempt to control others that is evident with patronizing politeness.