

Respect: Sometimes It Stings

I was maybe 30 years old -- maybe not even quite that old yet. I was helping work with the youth group at the Park City Church of Christ near Fayetteville, Tennessee. We would have get-togethers from time to time, and when it was all over, I would usually end up driving a church van load of kids to their respective homes. We were a small church of about 150 people, so the youth group was not huge.

One particular family had a few barely-teen or pre-teen kids. I remember on one occasion telling one of the kids to pick up a piece of trash or something to help clean up, and he responded, "Yes, sir." At that moment, I felt like someone punched me in the gut. I wondered, "Was that 'Yes, sir' for me?"

Now, don't get me wrong. We live in the South, and although other parts of the country may not do it as much, there is absolutely nothing wrong with teaching kids to say "Yes, sir" and "No, sir" and "Yes, ma'am" and "No, ma'am" to their elders. It is a way to show respect! But I was just 30 years old -- I was too young to be old!

I so wanted to tell him, "No, don't do that to me! Don't EVER say that to me again! I am still one of you!" But I couldn't. I really was his elder -- even though I was a young guy. I knew his parents had instilled this respect for "elders" and "authority figures" in him. Now, all I could do was accept it... go along with it... endure it... but I sure was not going to like it! I clenched my teeth, bit my tongue, smiled, and said nothing.

Now I am 53 years old. In my mind, I think I am 27, but in calendar years, I truly am 53. I long ago sort of accepted young people at church saying "Yes, sir" and "No, sir" to me -- their parents teach them to do it. But now, occasionally I will speak with a young adult at church -- this is someone old enough to have kids of their own -- and every now and then they will say to me, "Yes, sir" or "No, sir." Oh, man. That really hurts. Deep down, I really do feel like I am 27. No one should say, "Yes, sir" to a 27 year old... but again, it is back to that respect thing. I'm glad they have respect for their elders, I guess. But it doesn't seem right when it is for me... because I am not old. I am still one of them... I am 27. In my mind.

Sometimes I look in the mirror and I wonder who that gray-headed guy is looking back at me. Maybe he has a few gray hairs, a few MIA hairs, and a few new wrinkles here and there. And he doesn't look like any 27 year old I've ever seen. The unfamiliar face in the mirror smiles back at me. At least he is happy.

And one thing is for sure -- he has lots of good memories to share and to treasure. Yes, sir...

(Originally written: March 19, 2017)