

Editorial: Push back against contempt wherever it appears

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Contempt says, “I value you to the extent you do what I value,” which is to say, “What I value is the limit of your value.”

We need not look far to see such contempt at work. Three high-profile examples happened just in the last few days: Vice President Joe Biden’s cringeworthy “[you ain’t black](#)” comment, President Trump’s ongoing [belittling others](#), and [George Floyd dying](#) in police custody.

While two of these examples are different quantitatively than the third, inasmuch as they legitimate contempt, they are a seed leading to the third. Therefore, all three are the same qualitatively.

In Biden’s case, contempt came through clearly in his telling a black audience they owe him their vote. In Trump’s case, contempt was conveyed in continuing to call Biden, “Sleepy Joe,” and in retweeting disparaging tweets from one of his supporters. In Floyd’s case, contempt was seen in a police officer’s knee on his neck until Floyd lost consciousness.

Biden shouldn’t have said what he did, Trump shouldn’t have tweeted what he did, and Floyd shouldn’t be dead.

The seed of contempt produces death

Biden and Trump share in common their desire to be elected, and to reach their goal, they share the common political tactic of manipulating voting blocks. Even referring to people as “voting blocks” shows a certain contempt for people, reducing them to their lowest common denominator.

Both candidates, in trying to “win the black vote,” are demonstrating a degree of contempt for people, in general, and African Americans, in particular.

We ought to push back against such contempt in Biden and Trump—and in all politicians who demonstrate the same. As a [representative democracy](#), we can and must hold our representatives accountable when they hold us in contempt.

More worrisome is that contempt doesn’t limit itself to one person or group of people. When someone shows contempt for another person—whether in word or deed—it reflects that person’s estimation of all other people relative to him- or herself. Even if that reflection is no bigger than a seed, it has the ability to grow out of control.

Contempt isn’t Christian

Contempt is one of our oldest sins. Adam and Eve showed contempt for God’s command. Cain showed contempt for God’s favor of Abel. In both cases, contempt lead to death, and it still does.

Commonly understood, having contempt for someone is to consider that person worthless. In particular, it is to consider other people of less value than oneself. Christianly speaking, it is to insinuate Jesus was a fool for suffering death on the cross for that person’s sin—whoever *that* person or *those people* may be.

Seen this way, it ought to be obvious why we must push back such contempt wherever and however it appears.

Biblically speaking, contempt is a problem of the heart. Jesus, in his sermon about the heart, said: “Anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger

of the fire of hell” (Matthew 5:22). ‘Raca,’ according to the textual note in my Bible, is “an Aramaic term of contempt.”

Contempt is a defect of the heart that does not remain contained or limited to one person or group of people. The disease of contempt spreads to all people—infesting those outside of oneself if turned outward or consuming the self if turned inward.

Contempt is a killer no matter which way it turns. Turned outward, contempt will lead us to dehumanize others to the point of brutalizing or killing them with little or no remorse. Turned inward, self-contempt will lead us to abuse ourselves, sometimes beyond repair.

All too often, contempt rises up in me.

Responding to contempt

[John Newton wrote](#): “Whatever it be that makes us trust in ourselves that we are comparatively wise or good, so as to treat those with contempt who do not subscribe to our doctrine, or follow our party, is a proof and fruit of a self-righteous spirit.”

This is the same John Newton who wrote “Amazing Grace.” He goes on to call such contempt “leaven” and to characterize it as a problem of the heart.

In his famous hymn, Newton’s words about grace point us to the antidote against contempt.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.

I [once was lost, but now am found](#)
was [blind, but now I see](#).

The problem with contempt is the kernel of truth that we all have the ugliness of sin in us. The lie of contempt is in forgetting God's grace is extended to all of us.

To push back against contempt, we must remember two things.

1. [Each one of us is created in the image of God](#). That alone places each of us above contempt.

2. Though we allowed contempt to take hold in us, Jesus Christ died for us [in the midst of it](#), thereby redeeming us from contempt through the riches of God's grace—and not one of us any more or less than another.

Coming to terms with God's estimation of each one of us gives us the [creativity, compassion and courage](#) to push back against contempt wherever it appears.

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