



# Deference

vs. Offensiveness

**Deference is putting the welfare of others ahead of our own personal pleasures.**

Indulging in a pleasure may bring a moment of enjoyment—but a lifetime of damage.

All deference should be based on the incredible sacrifice that Jesus made in order to bring people to salvation. (See Romans 14:15–21.) He asks us to consider what He did when we are called upon to show deference.

*“For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.”* —Hebrews 12:3

**Deference is protecting others from situations that would weaken or offend them.**

Paul chose not to eat meat that was offered to idols, because to do so would offend other believers.

*“Let not then your good be evil spoken of.”* —Romans 14:16

## Definition

When Paul instructed believers to prefer one another in honor, he defined the essence of deference. The Greek word rendered *preferring* is *proegeomai*, meaning “to lead the way for others.” It is a strong word that connotes commanding with official authority, to be chief and having rule. Thus, as we defer to others, we experience the paradox spoken of by Jesus, “Whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all” (Mark 10:44).

Deference is making personal sacrifices in order to help others be successful and putting off words, attitudes, or actions that would cause others to be offended or weakened. We should defer whenever it will benefit the cause of Christ.

Deference and discretion work together. “The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression” (Proverbs 19:11).

The word *offense* adds further meaning to the concept of deference. “Giving no offense in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed” (II Corinthians 6:3). “Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of

many, that they may be saved” (I Corinthians 10:32–33).

Several Greek words are rendered *offense*. One is *proskomma*, which means “a stumbling block, an obstacle in the way which if one strikes his foot against he stumbles or falls.”

“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offense [*proskomma*]” (Romans 14:19–20).

In the following verse, the word *skandalizo* is rendered *offended*: “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended [*skandalizo*], or is made weak” (Romans 14:21).

The word *skandalizo* means “to entrap, trip up; to entice to sin; to cause displeasure.” It comes from the word *skandalon*, meaning much the same thing. “Wherefore, if meat [offered to idols] make my brother to offend [*skandalizo*], I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend [*skandalizo*]” (I Corinthians 8:13).

## Examples of Deference

Scripture contains significant examples of those who demonstrated deference, and their testimonies provide precedents

for parallel situations. Therefore, we are encouraged to meditate upon these testimonies so that we can accurately apply the precedents in new circumstances.

## 1. Deference to government

When a tax collector asked Peter if Jesus paid taxes, Peter said, “Yes.” However, Jesus asked Peter, “Of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own children, or of strangers?” (Matthew 17:25).

Peter answered, “Of strangers. Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free” (Matthew 17:26). Having established the fact that He had the right and freedom to not pay taxes, Jesus said, “lest we should offend [*skandalizo*] them . . . find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee” (Matthew 17:27).

## 2. Deference to children

When the disciples asked Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus called a child to Him and set him in the midst of them. Then He said, “Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1, 3).

Little children are expected to show deference to their parents and those around them. This humble deference is what Jesus praises: “Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4).

After praising the humility that prompts deference—in contrast to the carnal aspirations of the disciples—Jesus gives a strong warning about offending such children.

“Whoso shall offend [*skandalizo*] one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6).

The conscience of a child is very sensitive. Vulgar words and actions to which adults may have grown callous can be very hurtful and offensive to children. All must show deference to children.

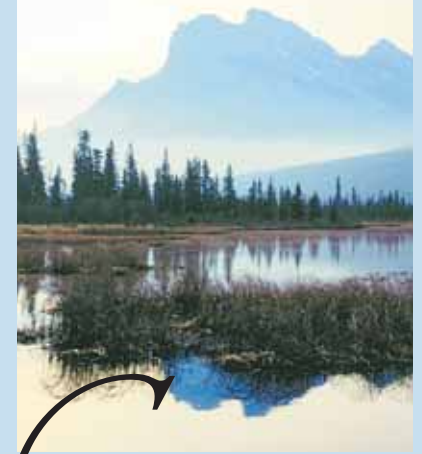
Following His warning, Jesus offers detailed instruction about offending children with impurity.

“Woe unto the world because of offenses [*skandalon*]! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh! Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.

“And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.

“Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 18:7–10).

The very life of a **timber wolf** depends upon its ability to show deference to the leader of the pack. If an “underling” asserts itself in any way, the leader will attack it in fury until the offending wolf offers its neck as an acknowledgment that it offended by putting itself first.



Good manners are daily displays of deference.

“There is no such thing as being a gentleman at important moments; it is at unimportant moments that a man is a gentleman. . . . If once his mind is possessed in any strong degree with the knowledge that he is a gentleman, he will soon cease to be one.”

—G. K. Chesterton





**T**he “father of faith” showed deference and thereby avoided destruction.

When conflict over limited grazing areas erupted between the herdsmen of Abraham and his nephew Lot, Abraham divided the land and allowed Lot to make the first choice. Lot chose the most attractive property. However, with this property came the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah. (See Genesis 13.)

**A** man won a crown of life by showing deference in the face of death.

John Harper and his little daughter were passengers on the *Titanic*. When he realized the ship was sinking, he made sure his daughter was safe and then gave his life preserver to another. Fighting the frigid water, he used his last bit of strength to lead others to eternal life.

*“Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”*

—Revelation 2:10

### 3. Deference to believers

Frugal shoppers are always looking for bargains, and first-century believers were no exception. Thus, when they saw the best meat in town on sale for the cheapest price, they bought it.

This meat was on the bargain counter for a reason—it had been dedicated to the temple gods, and the priests wanted to get their money from it.

When new believers who had renounced temple worship saw mature believers buying this meat they became offended, and a major controversy erupted in the young church. This disagreement was strong enough to warrant a ruling by the Jerusalem Council and a lengthy exhortation from the inspired pen of Paul.

In this delicate matter, Paul appealed for deference by those on both sides of the controversy. He appealed especially to those who thought it was right to eat the meat. “Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way” (Romans 14:13). This statement is a precise description of the word *skandalon*.

The great importance of deference can be seen in this narrative. Paul agrees with those who say that there is nothing inherently wrong with the meat. However, eating the meat becomes wrong if another believer is offended by it or if it is eaten in spite of an inward caution given by the Holy Spirit.

“I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with

thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:14–15).

Paul’s admonition was further confirmed by the Jerusalem Council, which declared that Gentile believers were not subject to the Mosaic laws but were to observe four “necessary things.”

“That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well” (Acts 15:29).

The final confirmation on the vital importance of deference to believers comes from the message of the Holy Spirit to two of the seven churches in Asia:

To the church of Pergamos: “I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication” (Revelation 2:14).

To the church of Thyatira: “I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols” (Revelation 2:20).

### 4. Deference to the Word

After Paul affirms the need to “give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God” (I Corinthians 10:32), he states his own commitment to deference: “Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved” (I Corinthians 10:33).

In the previous chapter, Paul explains how he demonstrated deference. “Though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more.

“And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.

“To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel’s sake” (I Corinthians 9:19–23).

## God’s Mandate for Deference

Deference requires more than choosing to do things that are good. Deference requires that we choose things that are excellent, that we in no way hinder our own walk or the walks of others.

“And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ” (Philippians 1:9–10).

## Results of Failing to Show Deference

The lack of deference can be a major contributing factor to the failures of those who are weaker in their faith or more sensitive than we are. Because of a lack of deference by those who claim to be God’s followers, many have turned

against Him in bitterness. Therefore, if we are aware of anyone who has been offended by our lack of deference, we should go to that person, humble ourselves, ask for forgiveness, and then renew our commitment to show deference.

### Personal Evaluation

#### How much deference do you show to others?

- Do you place stumbling blocks in the way of others by the things that you say, do, or wear?
- Do you have modesty and privacy in your home to protect your children from stirring up wrong desires?
- Do you protect your children from evil?
- Do you keep your home free from things that offend your children or cause them to struggle?
- Do you justify music or activities that offend or weaken fellow Christians?
- Do you offend people of other cultures, races, or ethnic groups by the words you use to describe them?
- Do you make allowances as much as you can to accommodate those from other backgrounds and philosophies?
- Do you understand and follow protocol when visiting another country?
- Do you pay questionable taxes in order not to bring offense to the Gospel?



**D**eference is exchanging my rights for the joy of encouraging another’s spiritual growth.

One of the most effective missionaries of all time was J. Hudson Taylor. He won the hearts of the people of inland China and drew multitudes to the Lord because he deferred to them by adopting their customs and style of clothing.



**D**eference is leading the way in showing others the true meaning of self-denial.

*“Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another.” —Romans 12:10*

**R**eusing to show deference is saying, “My momentary interests are more important than your eternal welfare.”