DISCIPLESHIP IN AN UNDISCIPLINED WORLD

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Society Grows Coarse

“Discipline” has become a dirty word in Dr. Spock’s brave new world. In the name of
cleanliness and for the sake of fostering individual creativity, children are reared like weeds with
little cultivation or pruning. Free expression to the point of rudeness is encouraged. Society’s
intemperance has led to a break-down in common courtesies, ranging from the proliferation of
just plain bad manners to open breaches of road rage and indiscriminate murder in school.

True Christians are not surprised by the degeneration of civility in this post-Christian age.
When there was a semblance of a universal Christian culture in North America, even non-church
goers gave lip service to the value of a Christian ethic.

The last 75 years, however, have seen the demise of mainline churches through outright
apostasy. Meanwhile, much of the evangelical church has lost its power and life-changing
message through creeping humanism (a.k.a. Arminianism). The result has been that Western
Christians have not been salty in stemming the decay of their civilization.

Background

Our post-Christian age is reaping the whirlwind of Darwinism. Man no longer has a soul
and he faces no future day of reckoning. Loss of accountability has led to a loss of moral
consciousness and self-restraint.

Besides Darwin’s evil influence, we also have been pelted by the rotten fruits of the
French Revolution. Our mixed up post-modern era is moving beyond the ultra-rationalism of the
French Revolution, yet many of its ingrained dictums still linger. For example, the revolutionary
slogan of “égalité” has been carried to its logical conclusion of co-ed bathrooms and women in
combat.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was the popular philosopher of the Revolution that challenged the
traditions of Christian civilization. He taught that “private property is theft” and that people are
happier when not forced to live within the artificial expectations of civilized society. His ideal
was “le bon savage,” the individual unfettered and exalted in natural impulses above social
mores.

Judith Martin, (a.k.a. Miss Manners), outwardly and unwittingly holds a biblical view of
human nature when she critiques the socially devastating effects of the Revolution. Decrying
Rousseau’s school of etiquette that celebrates the [alleged] “happy savage” in us all, she writes,
“Rousseau’s philosophy continues to survive in the pop-psychology and “human potential” movements of today, and in the do-nothing school of child-rearing, which has given us so many little—savages. In point of fact, we are all born rude. No infant has ever appeared yet with the grace to understand how inconsiderate it is to disturb others in the middle of the night.”

“The charge is often made against etiquette that it is artificial. Yes, indeed, it is. Civilization is artificial. When people extol the virtues of naturalness, honesty, informality, intimacy, and creativity—watch out. Honesty has come to mean the privilege of insulting you to your face without expecting redress, and creativity that it is wrong to interfere with a child who is destroying your possessions....”

A growing social rudeness is getting the attention of etiquette experts like Miss Manners. Rude radio talk show hosts are not only symptomatic, but help fuel the corrosion of our culture. The latest craze in the “brutal honesty” trend is the television quiz show, “The Weakest Link.” The title blatantly trumpets its underlying, evolutionary perspective about the human contestants, while the dour show hostess bluntly insults her departing guests who cannot pass the process of natural selection.

Forget about which side of the plate the knife and fork go! Etiquette experts now are reduced to pleading for a return to basic courtesies and old-fashioned manners. Admittedly, manners and civilization are artificial, but they are necessary contrivances for “living more or less harmoniously in a community,” say the social commentators.

**Biblical Social Critique**

When the Bible addresses the degeneration of basic human decency, it does not speak in terms of “crassness” nor “rudeness.” Rather it gets to the heart of the problem:

“…men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God…”

Outward behavior is an expression of the heart. A wicked heart necessarily issues forth in wicked behavior that mere rules of etiquette cannot control. No amount of sophistication can veil the deadly venom that is meant to destroy others.

Men who behave naturally apart from God’s grace actually will behave like brute beasts. Their teachers of evolution have taught them they are animals; unrestrained and encouraged, they live out this inclination.

Just one example of this brutish behavior is today’s common rebellion against God’s ordained authorities and slandering individuals in positions of responsibility. Jude 8-10 expresses the growing spirit of savagery:
“Likewise also these dreamers defile the flesh, reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries…. But these speak evil of whatever they do not know; and whatever they know naturally, like brute beasts, in these things they corrupt themselves.”

Not so strangely, this description comes in the context (vs. 7) of God’s condemnation of sodomy, another manifestation of unrestrained brutishness.

Biblical Social Remedy: Disciplining Children in the Nurture and Admonition of the Lord

The Bible’s manual for training individuals in “how to get along” is the book of Proverbs. Proverbs says much more on horizontal inter-relations than vertical relations or introspective investigations. The underlying basis for all relations, however, is clearly found in this book as a vertical relation to God. The key verse is found in the introduction: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (1:7). This message is reiterated in later proverbs.

Nothing less than a right relation to God will produce right behavior. God’s people must show lovingkindness, equity, and temperance. While social and parental expectations can exert a powerful influence in shaping proper behavior, these pressures ultimately prove to be only pragmatic in motivation. But a relation to God as Master and Savior leads to obedience from the heart.

The purpose of this collection of ancient wisdom was to subtract from the number of fools and add to the number of the wise within the community. The opening verses of Proverbs set the tone for growing in wisdom to understand life and to navigate its shoals:

1. “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:
2. To know wisdom and instruction, To perceive the words of understanding,
3. To receive the instruction of wisdom, Justice, judgment, and equity;
4. To give prudence to the simple, To the young man knowledge and discretion—
5. A wise man will hear and increase learning, And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel,
6. To understand a proverb and an enigma, The words of the wise and their riddles.
7. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction.
8. My son, hear the instruction of your father, And do not forsake the law of your mother;
9. For they will be a graceful ornament on your head, And chains about your neck.

Failure of society begins as failure in its homes. Children enter the world foolish and simple. They gain wisdom only if they are taught it. The teaching must take place in the home first (vs. 8), and then the church. Very few noble attitudes are learned in the schoolroom, but many baser attitudes are learned in the yard.
The Bible makes plain here that wisdom is as much a heart matter as it is a head matter. Fools who despise wisdom (vs. 7) have a conceit that vaunts themselves over their instructors. Only reverence for God and a natural family affection can overcome such arrogance.

As Christian parents seek to disciple the young souls with which God has entrusted them, the truth of the Proverbs should be a significant portion of their children’s diet. The regular memorization of the Proverbs could revolutionize how covenant parents rear their children.

**Biblical Social Remedy: Discipleship of Love**

The true model of social behavior is found in the words, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” This is more than the “love that makes the world go ‘round.” Rather, it is the ideal for which mankind was created and to which He calls us to return. When we love our neighbor, we reflect God’s attribute of love. Loving our neighbors is one of the ways that we love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

Jesus stressed this dual love for God and for our neighbors. While this ideal sounds radically challenging and new from His lips, it actually is the Bible’s old message for true disciples. Jesus conserved and clarified the revelation that had come through Moses.

Leviticus 19 is an interesting chapter that helps reveal the essence of Jesus’ teaching. Verses 17 & 18 are the basis of the ethic that Jesus expounds in the sermon on the mount:

“You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

To avoid any confusion about just whom we are to love, God further says that we are to love the stranger in our midst, as if he were one of our countrymen (19:34). The religious ethicists of Jesus’ day missed this truth and were duly convicted by Jesus’ teaching about a good Samaritan.

No other ancient religion commanded love for its god as did Jehovah (Deut. 6:5). If we love God, then we can love our neighbor in obedience to our Sovereign. Without God in our lives, it is impossible to love our neighbors fully and to be Jesus’ obedient disciples. Any effort apart from God degenerates into a pragmatic ethic instead of one of principle.

The whole book of Leviticus is about holiness, and chapter 19, not surprisingly, opens with a call to personal holiness. This call is on the basis of God’s own holiness and His covenant claim on His people. Then in the midst of a call to holiness and to worship (vs. 3b, “keep my Sabbaths”), there is immediately a command for children to reverence their parents:
“And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. Every one of you shall revere his mother and his father….” (19:1-3a).

Honor to whom honor is due, respect for authority and for the dignity of others, and common courtesies grow out of love for God and our pursuit of holiness in Him. God calls for common courtesies like the young rising in the presence of their elders. He demands equity and honesty in business dealings (vv. 35, 36). By grace Christ’s obedient disciples can be courteous and honest in the midst of a crooked generation. To do the “natural thing” when tempted would be to deny His holy claims and His supernatural power in us.

Spurs to Discipleship

Christ never intended His disciples to be doormats or milquetoasts. But He does call us to holiness and love in our daily walk. He requires Christian parents to be faithful in modeling and teaching the spirit of Christ to His lambs.

How can we be faithful disciples of the Master? Here are three reminders that motivate us.

- First, remember the example of Jesus. “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14).

- Second, we must know our place, not just in the world, but before our Lord and Judge. “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master” (Matt. 10:24). He is watching as He prepares for the day of judgment (Matt. 25:40).

- Lastly, true disciples will show the love of Christ out of a regenerated heart. Love gives and seeks the best for others (Phil 2:1-4; 1 Cor. 13). While most of humanity lives just under the veneer of civilization in order to avoid chaos and to keep from degenerating into open conflicts, Christ’s disciples show courtesies and deference out of genuine concern for others.

Conclusion

“Sophisticated” post-moderns are a funny bunch. Many have jettisoned traditional manners in the pursuit of crass expressions of individualism while demanding mutual tolerance.

As western civilization goes to the dogs in a post-Christian era, Jesus’ disciples will shine as lights in a dark world. In the every day market place and in the home, faithful obedience to the Master will draw attention to Him and His message.

“For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence. But the path of the just is like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day” (Prov. 4:17,18).
1 From her Harvard lectures contained in her 1985 book, *Common Courtesy*.

2 2 Timothy 3:2-4.

3 “And He said, What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts… pride, foolishness” (Mark 7:20,21).

4 “You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:32).