

June 22, 1975
Philippians 4:4-9
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MANNERS AND MORALS

I hope I may be forgiven today if I reminisce a bit about my youth. I am quite certain that it is not one of the first signs of approaching senility. It is true that the older we get the more we tend to reflect upon the past, but it is only because we have more past to reflect upon, and the mind of man is so constructed that he remembers the good and cherishes it, while tending to forget the bad. The good things of the past ought to be remembered and appreciated. That, I take it, is why we are trying to make something significant out of our nation's bicentennial.

Perhaps you will remember the lines of Robert Southey:

*"You are old, Father William," the young man cried,
"The few locks which are left you are gray.
You are hale, Father William, a hearty old man,
Now tell me the reason, I pray."*

*"In the days of my youth," Father William replied,
"I remembered that youth could not last.
I thought of the future whatever I did,
That I never might grieve for the past."*

That is good philosophy and certainly it is much more productive to look forward than to look back. But an occasional backward glance is not amiss and if nothing else may prevent us from repeating our own mistakes as well as those of others. To reminisce merely for the sake of reminiscing, to feel that the past was better than the present merely because it is past, is no doubt foolish. But to examine the past with a view to improving both the present and the future can be a productive and praiseworthy endeavor.

I would remember and call to your attention this morning that particular aspect of my youth which I have chosen to call "good manners", or what was often referred to as "common courtesy" and what, to my observation, is today becoming less and less common, due in no small part to that invidious doctrine which proclaims that we all are and ought to be absolutely equal: youth is the equal of age; ignorance is the equivalent of wisdom and experience; women are equal to men; all races, tribes, clans and families are equal; students and professors are equal, and etc., etc., ad infinitum, and in the opinion of some of us, ad nauseum. If you don't know the meaning of those two Latin phrases, it is strong evidence that we are not all equally educated, or that if we are, then some are more equal than others!

So let us for a moment examine the morals and the manners of the not too distant past--the mores and the courtesies of my childhood.

In my youth young people were taught to say, "Please", and "Thank you". They were taught to rise when an older person entered the room and always to respect the aged. If they had any breeding at all men always helped the ladies through doors and into chairs. Children were to be seen and not heard, especially at the dinner table. It was even considered proper in my youth to respond to adults, or even to peers, with "Yes sir" and "No sir", "Yes ma'am" and "No ma'am". We were taught to respect every kind of superiority and seniority!

One doesn't have to be an "old fuddy duddy", "a square", "a straight-laced puritan" to feel that our times have lost something valuable as these manners and common courtesies have been swept out of our society by whatever forces have been responsible.

Richard Weaver, in his book, Ideas Have Consequences, suggests that the equalitarian drive we have already mentioned has destroyed the sense of hierarchy which ought to exist in society. The passion for equality has made some feel it necessary to call everyone by their first name and try to be "buddy buddy" with those who are often, so obviously and in so many ways superior to themselves. This is a manifestation of the great passion for democracy wherein any one man is considered the equal of all others. Weaver suggests that in such a society no one knows where he stands, and perhaps that is the very reason why so many people run around today trying to discover who they are.

It is obvious of course that in certain critical places at certain critical times no one, even today, believes in this kind of radical equality. If we did, then in time of war we would select our generals by drawing names out of a hat and choose our president and other national leaders in similar fashion. You may be tempted to say that on occasion that might work out better for the country, but that would only reflect a kind of disillusioned facetiousness.

I would not argue that the loss of these relatively small acts of courtesy and good manners have caused the disintegration of society, or that if they were reinstated in our time we would suddenly come into a new millennium. They are, however, indicative of what has happened to us and I for one do not think their passing is wholly unrelated to some of the shabbier aspects of modern society. There ought to be distinctions between persons. A measure of honor and respect ought to be afforded those who have achieved certain kinds of success or endured certain vicissitudes, if only the endurance of life through seven or eight decades. Where there is no hierarchy of values no one knows what if anything is to be preferred.

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Let me suggest that there are different kinds of manners for different situations. We speak of physicians who possess, or who lack, "bedside manners". Those who are sick will often praise their physician's skill while lamenting his lack of such manners. There is evidence to support the conviction that good manners in such a situation can contribute much to the recovery of the patient. They can certainly instill faith and confidence in the physician.

Then there are what we call "company manners". Do you ever put them on at your house? We usually do so when we desire to impress someone. We want them to see us at our best. That is not hypocrisy because all of us are many selves and in this case we want others to see our best self. Such action reveals our conviction that manners are indeed important and do have consequences for good or for evil.

A long time before my own youth some men and women were designated "gentlemen" or "ladies". Those were not terms applied to all, only to those who had a certain high standard of behaviour. For example, they ate with knives and forks rather than with their fingers. A gentleman was a man of fine manners who treated others in a gentle way, that is, he would not lie or cheat or defraud others, but applied to all the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you."

Or consider the knights of the Middle Ages. The word "knight" is the equivalent of servant, one who with his arms was sworn to uphold the good, the true and the right. He, in his day, was the man of exemplary manners.

We may, in our day, discount manners and courtesy all we wish, but the fact remains that we are always being judged by those same manners and that same courtesy which we so discount. Our regard for manners may have deteriorated but human nature has remained the same, and Emerson put it well when he wrote:

"Your manners are always under examination, and by committees little suspected. . . and are rewarding or denying you very high prizes when you least think of it."

Edmund Spenser supported that conviction:

*"A gentle mind by gentle deeds is known,
For a man by nothing is so well betrayed
As by his manners."*

There is one other kind of manners that is extremely important--perhaps most important of all--family manners. Those are the manners we show toward one another at home and which teach us, or fail to teach us, the kind of manners we ought to have away from home. You whose children are young, do you often worry about how your child will behave when visiting in another home? He will behave pretty much the way you have taught him to behave in his own home, which means he will probably be just a little bit better away from home than he is at home, for like you, he will try a little harder elsewhere.

But the manners we have at home are extremely important because they do in fact determine the manners of society. The kindness and thoughtfulness displayed and practiced there--and that is what good manners are, kindness and thoughtfulness--either soften or harden the relationships between persons.

Good manners are really an extension of good religion. They are the expression in everyday relationships of the basic moral and ethical principles taught by the great religions. They show a degree of respect for those who are older, those who have achieved, those who may be less capable or less able than ourselves, or have greater needs. They demonstrate our admiration for achievement.

Many people want to be great from the point of view of having done something that all will admire and proclaim. Not very many of us are going to achieve that kind of greatness. There's another kind of greatness that's much more necessary, and because it can be practiced by every one of us, will produce much greater results-- the practice of good manners, of common courtesy, of the religious virtues, everyday toward every person we meet, in the home and out of it.

Paul, writing to the Philippians, was urging them to have good Christian manners. He recognized, as we should, that manners, like religion, are caught more than they are taught. And so he said to the Philippians, "All that you heard me say or saw me do, put into practice; and the God of peace will be with you."

We might well ask ourselves if we could say that to our children and our grandchildren, and mean it: "All that you heard me say or saw me do, put into practice." Are we an example worthy of following?