

Covenant High School Chapel

Jan. 5, 2000

“Manners”

Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

I've dealt with today's topic three or four times during the years of Covenant High School's existence. The last time was two years ago during the Spring week that the seniors and juniors were in Great Britain. I had thought that I might use that time for the purpose again. In that way, no one would hear the same message twice. But several of you have been asking me to deal with the subject again and so I shall. I was persuaded to do so in part because some of you handed me such an ideal illustration for my message today just a few weeks ago. More of that later.

My subject is manners, more especially, good manners. You know what manners are: a proper way of behaving in a variety of situations: at table, in a conversation, walking on a street, virtually any situation you can think of; even when you are by yourself: my favorite definition of a gentleman is “someone who uses a butter knife when he is alone.”.

Now good manners, by themselves, are not true holiness. You can find plenty of well-mannered heathens, *especially in the South!* What is more, I am certainly prepared to admit that good manners change over time. Proper behavior is defined differently in different times and places. In Europe, often, it is regarded as proper to greet people, even people you don't know well, with a kiss on both cheeks, one cheek after the other. They don't as often shake hands; and there are cultures where a polite greeting *never* involves a handshake; that would be regarded as impolite. They bow in Japan, not in America. Or forms of address. Mr Hoy, the principal at Heritage Christian School continues to call me Mr. Rayburn or Pastor Rayburn. Several times I told him to address me by my first name; but he replied that in his culture – he is Cambodian – it would be regarded as highly improper for him to address an older man by his first name and he can't bring himself to do it.

So it was in biblical times. “Footwashing” was an important consideration for guests who came to your home wearing sandals over dusty roads. Women in veils in public was *de rigueur* in certain places but not others.

But, all of that being admitted, good manners are a part of biblical holiness and of the conduct, the behavior that God expects of his children. As with other parts of our behavior, God is never satisfied if we have a good attitude toward others, but do not express that love, that consideration, that respect in our behavior.

So, it is not enough to have submissive and respectful thoughts or attitudes toward one's elders or superiors, as is certainly required by the fifth commandment. It is also necessary to embody, give physical expression to that submission and respect by one's actions.

Leviticus 19:32: “Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord.”

Attitude and action go together and must go together.

1. Because we are both body and soul and *we* are not wholly respecting our elders if our bodies do not.
2. Attitude and action always go together, strengthen or weaken one another. Without the behavior, the attitude will always be weak.

One of the great illustrations of this in our time is the changing manners of men toward women (standing when they enter; opening the door for them; walking on the street side of the sidewalk when walking with a woman). The point of such behavior was not that women couldn't open doors for themselves. Presumably they could get into a building all by themselves if a man were not present! But these were ways of embodying the special respect that it was then believed that men owed women and that women needed to have from men. Our society has rebelled against such manners thinking that they amount to an open declaration 1) of a fundamental difference between men and women; and 2) some weakness or dependence of women on men. Of course, both things are true and our society is proving it to the harm and misfortune of its women and to the degrading of its men. If men have no special obligation for women then what is manhood for? And courtesy, taught early, was a way of imparting to boys and young men a life-long conviction that it is unmanly to mistreat a woman, to be boorish around her, to make her uncomfortable. When boys learned that their masculinity would be judged by how they treated women, the world was a much better place, safer place, for women.

“To Sir with Love” Not today! No teacher would dare attempt to bring highschoolers to a more serious view of life by teaching girls to expect respectful treatment from boys.

But, remember, manners are simply one application of the obligation to love our neighbor. It is easy to see that good manners are just a way of showing respect and consideration to others, treating them in a way you would yourself like to be treated.

1. Don't chew with your mouth open. Why? What difference does it make the child asks?
2. Don't hunt around on the platter when it is passed for the largest piece of meat but take the piece nearest to you. The other is selfishness – thinking of yourself before others; additionally it is proud (remember the Lord's admonition: don't grab the best seat or the host may, in front of the dinner party, have to ask you to sit elsewhere), imagining that your interests and desires are more important than anyone else's.
3. Boom boxes and loud shouting matches at night in my neighborhood is very much like interrupting others when they are speaking. A lack of concern for others; behaving as if they didn't matter, or didn't even exist.
4. Phone manners, which I harp on with you CHS kids. A violation of the golden rule. You have no idea what you have interrupted. You make a request without helping the person answering to know whether he ought to do what you ask or not. The better way...
5. “Sir” and “Ma'am” in replies to your elders is a way of honoring the 5th commandment. “You guys” is not!

Now, I said that you had given me a good illustration of the importance of manners, of what they mean, of what the absence of them really means.

CHS Christmas concert. A number of you in the balcony, the high balcony. And you were talking away, making enough noise while the concert was going on and the choir was singing that a number of adults seated in the lower balcony looked back to try to shame you into silence. To no avail. So, finally, I went back and stood right next to you. And you got quiet. Perhaps you didn't know that several adults came up to me afterward and thanked me for shutting you up and venting their irritation at your behavior. (Can't remember all who were there. I'm not interested in naming names. We all need to learn these lessons.) What I want you to think about is what your talking and stage whispering at a time when talking, when any kind of noise was inappropriate really means.

1. The singing choir and the folks listening to the concert are not important.
2. Your interest in having a good time talking is more important than the concert or the enjoyment of it by others.
3. The concert didn't interest you so it wasn't interesting and could be ignored.
4. You and your interests are the measure of all things.
5. Others really don't matter to you. At least they didn't right then.

Now, put it that way and bad manners seem really bad, shameful. But that is what bad manners are. They are just another way of ignoring others in order to please yourself.

I'm not interested in CHS kids having a reputation for being mannerly so that people will think we are a high class prep school. I want you to practice good manners and to build them into your life as a way of living an other-centered life, the life Christ calls us to; of building into your daily behavior, even in small things, a deep regard for others and a putting of them before yourself.

Paul was a perfect gentleman. So was the Lord Jesus Christ!