

# “The Recovery of Discipline”

a sermon by

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**Text: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8).**

Several weeks ago Don Imus, who hosted a morning talk show, found himself in a great deal of trouble following a very racist remark he made about a group of young women on the Rutgers University basketball team. The firestorm that emerged after Imus’ remarks and his subsequent firing by CBS have raised a great deal of concern about the use of language and the limits of free speech in this nation. There have also been a number of questions raised about how language is used, not just on “talk radio” but also the excessive violence and crassness of so-called “rap music.” But, in many ways, the problem of which I am speaking goes beyond simply the controversy surrounding Don Imus. There is a “coarsening of culture” that is evident in many ways: in crude language, in inappropriate dress, and in the cult of celebrities that focuses attention on tragic figures such as Anna Nicole Smith, Britney Spears, and Paris Hilton. One sees it often in the misuse and abuse of money—the McMansions that are sprouting in Charlotte like dogwood trees where the use of space and the aesthetics of a neighborhood are crudely ignored in the desire of building bigger and bigger mansions that waste space, resources, and energy. I live in a neighborhood where so many houses are being torn down that every evening when I return from work I wonder if my house is still going to be there or whether someone may have torn it down by mistake while I was away.

## I.

This “coarsening of culture” should not be a foreign concept to the Christian community. The New Testament is filled with illustrations in which the church found itself in conflict with the culture around it. This was certainly true in the city of Philippi, one of the major cities of

Macedonia, and a common stopover on one of the major roads between the East and West in the Roman Empire. The Christian community at Philippi was the first church established by Paul on European soil (Acts 16:11-13). Paul seemed to have had close contact with the people of that church in the years that followed (Philippians 4:15-16). Like Ephesus, Rome, and Corinth, the city of Philippi had its share of problems. Paganism abounded. The violence of the Roman games, the disregard for human life that was a part of the Roman culture, and the loose sexual practices of the day created a great problem for Paul and the church at Philippi.

Although the Apostle Paul was in prison at the time of the writing of the letter, he demonstrated a great deal of empathy with his hearers in seeking to enable the Christian community to live faithfully in a pagan culture. For that reason the words of Paul take on a special meaning: “Whatever is pure, whatever is honorable, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:8). Fred Craddock, in his commentary on Philippians, notes that the Apostle Paul drew this list of virtues not only from the heart of the Jewish and Christian tradition, but also from the Greek moralists as well. The honorable, the just, the pure, the lovely—these were virtues that the ethicists of the Greek culture extolled. Paul used what was probably an established list of these virtues to call the Christian community to an ethic of transformation.

So, one of the important questions that we all face is how we bring a halt to this “coarsening of culture” that threatens the society in which we live. Certainly, one clue to this is the recovery of discipline as a key to the edification of the community in which we live.

## II.

One of the key elements of discipline is self-control. Our society for the most part is not characterized by self-control. We value energy, vigor, creativity and aggressiveness, but how often do we emphasize self-control? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has a saying that is pertinent to this discussion: “Wide is the gate and broad is the way,” he said, “that leads to destruction. Narrow is the gate,” he went on to say, “that leads to life, and few there be who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

In the Presbyterian or Reformed faith there has always been a strong emphasis on simplicity. John Calvin, the great Reformer of the Sixteenth Century, put a great deal of emphasis on the simplicity and integrity of the Christian life. In many ways Calvin reacted negatively to the excessiveness of the medieval church. Calvin removed from the churches under his influence all of these evidences of excess: the jeweled crosses, the ornate statues, the expensive relics. For Calvin, these excesses kept people from the focus of the simplicity of the gospel.

That is the heart of the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus understood that discipline was the key to greatness. That is the sense of the importance that Jesus attributed to “the narrow way.” Attention is narrow. When William Gladstone, the great statesman of England who single-handedly ended the slave trade in that country, was once asked the secret of his success, he answered “concentration.” Decisiveness is narrow. You cannot decide something

vaguely or in general. You have to decide in particular. Loyalty is narrow. You cannot be devoted to conflicting causes. You have to choose and the choice is a narrow gate.

Several weeks ago I watched the HBO sports special on television that focused on the years that John Wooden served as the head basketball coach at UCLA in the 1960's and 1970's. In the later part of his career UCLA won the national championship ten out of twelve years. In one run of wins that spanned parts of three years the UCLA Bruins won 88 games in a row, a record not likely to be broken. John Wooden was a strict disciplinarian. That was the secret to his success. It drove his players crazy. The first basketball practice of each year began with a long dissertation by Wooden on the proper way to put on a sock. "Wrinkles," he would say as all the players would roll their eyes and look at each other in disbelief "can cause blisters." Each practice was the same. The drills that began in October were repeated every day throughout the season. Most of the players agreed that the practices were harder than the games. There was no passing behind the back or dribbling between the legs. "It isn't necessary," said the coach. Facial hair was not allowed. Coach Wooden said it was hard to keep dry and could give the players a cold. Many of the players noted that as they grew older, they realized that the basketball coach was not trying to teach them just about playing the game of basketball, but about the game of life. Bill Walton, an All-American Center, who was once arrested as a UCLA student for demonstrating against the Vietnam War, observed how the sayings that the coach passed on to the players stayed with him the rest of his life. John Wooden was a teacher and he had a bulletin board with little pithy sayings that he drilled into each player: "Failure to prepare is preparation for failure"—that kind of thing.

Jesus was right. The broad way is always easy. The narrow way is hard. But the narrow road is the road to life.

#### IV.

The recovery of discipline is not only necessary in the life of our culture, it is always necessary in the life of the church. John Calvin insisted that the marks of the "true church" were the preaching of the Gospel, the administration of the Sacraments, and the practice of discipline, which was a way of insuring the integrity of the community against forces that might destroy it.

This is certainly true for ministers. Reinhold Niebuhr once spoke of the "Hazards and Dangers of the Christian Ministry." In this chapel address he warned a group of young ministers against the powerful idolatry of trying to be all things to all people. Ministers today face enormous temptations and demands. Often we are called upon to administer staff and programs, to engage in fund raising activities and a host of other responsibilities that divert us from our primary tasks as preachers, teachers, and pastors. Ministers today are often viewed by many people as little more than pals, or those people who are supposed to relate to everyone in a very casual matter. Recently, I came across a copy of Frederick Buechner's latest book sermons entitled *Secrets in the Dark* in which he comments about his mentor in the faith, Dr. George Buttrick, who for a long time was the minister at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. As a young man, Buechner was attracted to that church and to the preaching of Dr. Buttrick. In speaking of his relationship with George Buttrick Buechner says this: "These were also the days before ministers were supposed to be everybody's great pal and to be called

by their first names from the word go, the trouble with which, at least for me is that it's not another great pal that I go to church to look for, but a prophet, priest and pastor. Buttrick for me became, wonderfully, all three, and though I have never met a warmer, kinder man, we never became pals, for which I am grateful, and if there was anybody in his congregation who called him George, I never happened to hear it."

There is another element of the need for the recovery of discipline in the church today and that is in regard to the individuals who serve as officers of the church. Dr. John Leith noted several years ago that there is a need in the Presbyterian Church for the recovery of a qualified eldership. Becoming an elder in the Presbyterian Church has too often become little more than being on the board of directors of the Rotary Club or the United Way. Woodrow Wilson, who served as President of Princeton University and the United States once observed that the highest honor he had ever received was to serve as an elder in the Presbyterian Church. The role of the elder has been severely eroded by the system of rotation. To be sure, the rotation of officers was a necessary reform in the church, but it has had its negative effects. Until a few years ago elders in a local church were elected to serve for life. Most of them understood that the church they served was God's church, which had been placed under their care and supervision by the call of God and they were not going to let someone destroy it. The call to be an officer in the Presbyterian Church is not a right or an entitlement and it demands hard work and sacrifice.

Arnold Toynbee, in his massive work *A Study of History* contends that one clear sign of a civilization's decline is when the elite people, whom Toynbee labels as "the dominant majority" begin to mimic the vulgarity and promiscuity exhibited by society's "bottom dwellers." That is precisely what so many of our political leaders and celebrities have done. The result is that the whole culture is vulgarized.

In his 1948 Nobel Prize acceptance speech William Faulkner declared, "I decline to accept the end of man. Man will not merely endure but prevail," Faulkner observed, "for he alone among the creatures has a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice, and endurance."

Today we must refuse the coarsening of culture. We must push back against an age that that is pushing hard against us.

We must redeem the times.

Amen!