

## **GOOD BEHAVIOR**

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Mark 12:28-31  
Ephesians 5:1-4, 8-14

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It happens every day on the streets and on the ball fields, in the classrooms and on the playgrounds, at the mall and the office and the factory and in homes throughout America. What happens is the aggressive assertion of individual rights above the good of others, intemperate and even vulgar language, and a general impatience and even hostility toward those of differing opinions. What happens is bad manners and rude behavior. There are cell phone conversations at inappropriate times and places, and loud music that we are forced to listen to when someone's car pulls beside ours. And there's just so much shouting, shoving, demanding, asserting, accusing, posturing, and condemning.

This sort of behavior seems to be everywhere. All too often these days, people seem to choose humiliation and embarrassment – they choose the low road instead of the high road – they act more like out of control barbarians than human beings created in the image of God. Studies actually show that this bad behavior and general rudeness has significantly increased among both workers in most work places as well as among customers who frequent places of business.

I wonder what Emily Post would say to so much of the behavior that is seen in our society today. Perhaps many of you don't even know the name, Emily Post. It would be understandable if you didn't, because Emily died in 1960, the year before I was born. But for about forty years, she was basically our nation's expert when it came to etiquette – in other words, good manners and proper behavior. She expressed her convictions and gave advice in books, articles and newspaper columns. She firmly believed that manners were "the outward manifestation of one's innate character and attitude toward life." In other words, she believed that how we behave outwardly is a direct reflection of who we are inside.

Certainly, many things may have changed since Emily Post expressed those thoughts, but clearly there is an enduring truth to that statement that can't be ignored. Considering the rude and obnoxious outward behavior that many of us witness most every day might there be good reason to be concerned about what's inside so many people? Much of the time I tend to be someone who tries to see the positive in people and situations, I will often excuse bad behavior by telling myself, "Now Joyce, just remember they may be having a really bad day." Of course, none of us should be judging what's inside someone else – there is only One who can accurately do that.

So, in a society where freedom of expression reigns supreme and anything seems to go, what are we suppose to think, how are we suppose to behave? In Ephesians chapter 5, the Apostle Paul sets before all Christians the very highest standards of good behavior in the world. He says, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us..." (Eph. 5:1-2a) This imitation in which we are invited to participate is directly connected to our knowledge and personal experience of being dearly loved by our heavenly Father. When the foundation of our lives is love – God's love for us and our love for God, then the result is good behavior.

Paul uses the dualism of light and darkness to emphasize this point: "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord, you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true" (Eph. 5:8-9). Through the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus, God's love was revealed to the world. This love is like a powerful light – a light that not only reveals the existence of sin and darkness, but a light that actually transforms it. When this light of God's love is at work within you and me then the result is fruit that reflects God's love – the result is behavior that is good and right and true.

It is a well-known in the field of behavioral science that people who know they are loved behave differently from those who aren't. Psychologists tell us that children who do not experience love often grow up to show a variety of improper and anti-social behavior. The experience of love is essential in the development of good and appropriate social behavior. Well as Christians, we know without a doubt that we are loved by our heavenly Father. God has proven his love to us in countless ways, but most clearly and fully through his Son. Because we are loved there is no excuse for us to not show love. Simply put, we live by a different set of rules than those who have not experienced, who do not know the amazing love of God. As Christians, we...

love our neighbors as ourselves,  
listen for God's voice, not our own,  
consider ourselves to be subject one to another,  
practice kindness and charity,  
bear each other's burdens,  
forgive as we have been forgiven.

Jesus taught us all about good behavior and it has everything to do with love. He said, "...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength..." and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mk. 12:30-31). It's the Great Commandment – it's how we are meant to live – it is how we are to treat one another. Good behavior is the result of following the golden rule of love. Good behavior is what happens when we treat others as we want to be treated. When it comes right down to it, what could be more Christian than to love God and to love others!

Therefore, if you want people to be kind to you, be kind to them. If you don't want to be cut off in traffic, don't be the person who cuts off other drivers. If you want to be let out into traffic, let others out. If you want civil treatment at the grocery store, or at work or school, treat others with civility and respect. And even if you don't get civility in return, keep your cool, and let the kindness flow. Why? Because you are loved. Christ has taught you and shown you what love looks like.

Think about it, people often express the qualities and tendencies of their parents. It's the old "apple-doesn't-fall-far-from-the-tree" concept. Let's face it, children often become a lot like their parents – many of us did whether we particularly wanted to or not. So by nature, children of God should reflect the qualities and tendencies of God. Paul emphasizes that very point by saying that we are to be "imitators of God, as beloved children..."

There is nothing cuter than a little boy with a plastic lawnmower in hand, following behind his dad with the real lawnmower. There is nothing more adorable than a little girl wearing her mother's clothes and jewelry and trying to walk in her mother's shoes. But then again, who hasn't heard a little 4-5 year old using words that even an adult shouldn't be using? It's not hard to guess who the child is imitating.

A writer who was preparing an article on the Amish spent some time with them. One day when he was on the playground of an Amish school, he noticed the children never screamed or yelled. This, of course, amazed him, because it's so different than the typical American playground. He spoke to the schoolmaster. He said he hadn't once heard an Amish child yell, and asked why the schoolmaster thought that was so. The schoolmaster replied, "Well, have you ever heard an Amish adult yell?" So, who is your Father? If you and I behave in a typically non-loving, non-forgiving, non-merciful manner, what does that say about our relationship with God?

The fact is that many of us face harsh behavior every day, and it's not always easy for us to deal with rude, obnoxious and seriously unkind behavior. Such behavior can have an effect on us – it can even rub off on us. But those of us who truly know that we are loved, who remember even in the harshest of times who our Father is, we can choose to be "imitators of God." We can behave with the kind of love and charity and forgiveness as befits our family heritage. A heritage which I might add was secured for us at great cost by Christ.

As Christians, we don't need Emily Post or another more contemporary expert in proper etiquette to tell us how to act properly. For us, good behavior looks like God's love – sacrificial and life-transforming. Therefore, let us strive to imitate none other than God, who is our heavenly Father!