

A Disciplined Life

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David Brooks, an occasional guest columnist in the AJC, made this observation (12/5/06):

A generation ago, the gods of education fashion ordained that children should be liberated from desks-in-a-row pedagogy (teaching, jj) to follow their “natural” inclinations. In those days, human beings were commonly divided between their natural selves, assumed to be free and wonderful, and their socially constructed selves, assumed to be inhibited and repressed.

But now, thanks to bitter experience and scientific research, we know that the best environments don’t liberate students. We have rediscovered that the most nurturing environments are highly structured. Children flourish in homes that are organized, in families where attachments are stable, among people who plan for the future and within cultures that celebrate work. Many of today’s most effective anti-poverty institutions are incredibly intrusive, even authoritarian.

Wow! What an admission, especially by a columnist for the flagship of liberal journalism, the *New York Times*. I would only add in the first line of the second paragraph: “thanks to bitter experience and scientific research *and the teaching of the Bible*, we know ...”. But you’ll never read *that* in the NYT.

But sure enough, what Mr. Brooks is espousing is a Biblical principle, one that runs against the grain of unfettered personal liberty. Our society has come to see any limits whatsoever as an infringement of our “rights” and guaranteed to produce bondage, futility and misery. Utopia is the land of “do what I want to do, say what I want to say.” Utopia is also an imaginary land bordering on Mordor (for you *Lord of the Rings* fans). Some observations:

1) Little things matter. What is wrong with students dressed in gang logos, slouching in their desks, looking out the window instead of paying attention to the teacher? Answer: *Everything*.

Is a parent an overbearing ogre to make a child eat everything on his plate, keep her room neat, say “sir” or “ma’am” or “please,” or comb their hair? Do these things *really matter*? **Yes, they do.** No, failure in these areas is not a felony, but the difference is between an atmosphere of discipline and attention to detail and slovenly, “couldn’t care less” apathy.

2) Big things are accomplished only by learning to do little things well. David killed Goliath only after practicing on lions and bears. Jesus said, “*He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much ...*” (Lk 16:10).

Typically, humans don’t handle freedom and flexibility well. They inevitably lead to laziness and indolence. They invite “self” to the forefront, and self is incredibly demanding. Self-*denial* is what Jesus (and boot camp) stresses (Mt 16:24-25), and we begin to instill this principle when we hold our children accountable for the “little” things.

Further, what is wrong with applauding after a baptism, holding our hands up (and/or swaying) during prayer, or wearing jeans to worship? “Does the Bible say you *can’t*?” Perhaps not, but that isn’t the only question to consider. The deeper question is: Is there a consistency of nature between our behavior (which may be a matter of judgment) and commands/principles that are of similar nature? Do my actions demonstrate discipline that prepares me to make the right choice when things get serious? Our society has lost this sense of “ought” as it is connected to a disciplined life that operates according to well-defined rules. Let us hope and pray that the church does not grow similarly soft.