



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# Uncommon Decency

Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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*Hebrews 12:14-17*

*1 Peter 3:8-16*

It was just over 25 years ago that Richard Mouw, then President of Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote a book titled “Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World.”

He begins his book by quoting from an essay in which the author says “that Americans are facing a crisis...because we ‘have let our standards of civility and truth waste dangerously away’.”

Civility, common decency that is uncommon today, and I’m glad he included something about a lack of concern for the truth.

If we would cultivate a culture of civility, if we would reclaim common decency, then we cannot play fast and loose with the truth.

What’s striking is that this was written twenty-five years ago...as the saying goes, “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

Or as a NASA scientist once told me, “The more things change, the more they remain insane!”

Over three thousand years ago, when the children of Israel were taken off to Babylon as captives, they faced some serious questions about civility.

They were aliens in a strange land, and Psalm 137 records their agony: “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

God answered their question through the prophet Jeremiah. You are to settle into the land for the long haul, the prophet told the people; construct homes to live in, raise crops, get married and have children; *“multiply there, and do not decrease”* (Jeremiah 29:4-6)

And then a very important “policy statement” is added: *“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”* (Jeremiah 29:7)

This is a call to civility, common decency.

God is telling the Israelites, and us, that neither indifference nor hostility is a proper way of treating neighbors who are different, with whom we have disagreements about lifestyles, religion, politics, or whatever.

We must seek their welfare. Indeed, it is in pursuing the well-being of others that we realize our own well-being.

In fact, this truth was written into our nation’s Constitution, *“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...”*

I guess the question for us today is if we can honestly sing “home on the range where never is heard a discouraging word.”

The truth is that the cultural winds that are sweeping across these amber waves of grain are filled with storm clouds of more than discouraging words.

Os Guinness described those storm clouds a few years ago in his book “The Case for Civility”: “Name-calling, insult, ridicule, guilt by association, caricature, innuendo, accusation, denunciation, negative ads, and deceptive and manipulative videos have replaced deliberation and debate. Neither side talks to the other side, only about them.”

As followers of Jesus Christ, we have the opportunity to speak to our world in a different way.

Peter says it clearly, and let’s be clear, Peter is not writing to people like you and me. He is writing to those who have no power, no standing in society.

Peter lived in a world governed by naked power and force, tyrannical and terrorizing.

He’s writing to the poor, the slaves, the persecuted; these are the people of the early church, and he urges them to have the uncommon decency of ‘sympathy, compassion, tenderness, humility...not to repay evil with evil, tweet for tat, but repay with a blessing.’

He quotes from the 34<sup>th</sup> Psalm: *“Those who desire life and desire to see good days, let them keep their tongues from evil and the lips from speaking deceit.”*

Peter, as he had learned from Jesus’ words and life, speaks to the ‘least of these’ to lead the way to what the Psalmist calls the “good days” or as the letter to the Hebrews describes it, “the holiness by which we see God.”

So how much more is it ours today as children of God with privilege and power to “pursue peace” with speech saturated by the grace of being reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

Our words matter. How we use our words matter. The tone of our words matters.

The late Vaclav Havel was a playwright, essayist, and dissident under the communist regime of Czechoslovakia.

After the fall of the communist rule, he served as president of Czechoslovakia from 1989 until 1992 and when the Slovak region separated to form its own country, he was president of the Czech Republic from 1993 to 2003.

In other words, Havel was not a detached pundit or a critic from the sidelines. He was a player.

He wrote of three personal convictions that guided his speech:

- He wanted his words to repeatedly and regularly draw attention to the moral dimensions of social life. "People want to hear that decency and courage make sense," he said.
- Leadership, he believed, should act as a positive influence creating, as he says, "a climate of generosity, tolerance, openness, broadmindedness, and a kind of elementary companionship and mutual trust."
- He wanted his ideals and values, his longing for justice, decency, and civility, to be injected into the decisions that he was required to make.

We know we live in a broken world. There are serious issues that need constructive solutions.

I'm very aware that these issues, like people, are not simple. They require significant effort and care to understand. But reducing complex challenges to one-liners, tweeted declarations, emotion-driven oversimplifications, sound bites, and snarky, dismissive responses usually reveals a lack of understanding or humility or a willful choice to misrepresent or misinform for personal, professional, or partisan gain.

I like what Barbara Brown Taylor says, "The great thing about civility is that it does not require you to agree with or approve of anything. You don't even have to love your neighbor to be civil. You just have to treat your neighbor the same way you would like your neighbor to treat your grandmother, your child."

When we value and respect others as children of God, when we truly pursue peace with everyone, our desire is to help people to understand, not to mislead; to heal, not simply to get our way.

And as we look across from 'sea to shining sea,' we know there's a better way to be humans in community, that we are a better than this as a people.

Yes, God reminds us that we are to be citizens who pray for our leaders. But let's also remember that we have a citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

That's the good news of the gospel: Through Jesus Christ we are a new people who live differently.



We offer a word of life that speaks to and speaks for and speaks with civility, that treats all others with dignity and respect.

I believe that in Jesus Christ we find a way of life marked by speech that is a model for common decency, civility in our communities.

First is speech that tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It offers an open and honest account of understanding and experience.

Honest speech promotes trust and good will within society.

Second is speech that is, what I call, critically civil. It promotes civility by confronting what is wrong, morally or factually, and refuses to remain silent in the face of injustice and lies.

Critically civil speech is correction that is offered with humility and without impugning the dignity and integrity of the other.

Third is speech that opens the mind. You might think of it as speech that teaches. Like Jesus the teacher, it is to speak with wisdom and experience, with a passion for truth and understanding.

Fourth is speech that is open, honest, and respectful conversation between two or more people. It is to talk with another listening. It is to listen while another talks.

This form of speech promotes civility by encouraging respect for the stranger, to open doors for life together with peace and tranquility.

If you will, this is conversation with all your heart, soul, and mind to God and neighbor.

Jesus lived, taught, and invited others into this way of life that speaks to faith and hope and love.

He practiced a compassionate civility that our world needs so badly.

So, this day I offer to you this covenant from Presbyterian pastor Don Meeks, a covenant for our lives with our family, friends, our community, and for this nation “in order to promote the general welfare of all people”:

- In light of John 17:20-23, I will pray for and live towards unity with other people.
- In light of Matthew 7:3-5, I will acknowledge my own prejudices, excesses and failings before I attempt to criticize or correct other people.
- In light of Romans 12:10 and 18, I will trust that the intentions of those with whom I disagree are honorable, and I will seek the best of what I see in their efforts to serve in the way of Jesus Christ.
- In light of Proverbs 18:13 and James 1:19, I will seek to listen with understanding before speaking my own concerns.
- In light of 1 Peter 3:15, I will contend for my convictions with gentleness and respect out of reverence for Jesus Christ.

My prayer today is that twenty-five years from now, the preacher standing in this pulpit will not have to be preaching about uncommon decency but will celebrate common decency that promotes the welfare of all people, the good days for people who seek peace and pursue it.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630  
[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)