

"DETERMINED DISCIPLESHIP"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
August 9, 1992

"DETERMINED DISCIPLESHIP"

INTRODUCTION

Fact is often stranger than fiction. For instance, when authorities in Baldwin, Wisconsin finally caught up with some local cattle rustlers, it turned out that the rustlers had been carrying off calves in the back of a Chevrolet Chevette. That meant loadin a cow of up to 600 pounds through the rear hatch of a tiny car. You have to admire their determination. Those rustlers were willing to work hard for what they stole. While a number of people might be tempted to load stray cattle into a pick-up truck, few would be tempted to do it with a small Chevy. We appreciate people with determination whenever or wherever we encounter them.

St. Paul had that same kind of determination in mind when he told young Timothy to go out and to "fight the good fight". Of course, St. Paul here is talking about a very special "good fight". He's talking about the "good fight" of being a worthy disciple of Christ. Real discipleship can be costly. It is for persons of drive and daring, for persons of courage and character, for persons of faith and fearlessness.

Let's think about some of the qualities of a determined disciple of Christ. From our text for the day, we can settle on three characteristics that are essential and perhaps you can add to these that I'm going to lift up.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR LIFE

First of all, we have to learn to take responsibility for our own lives.

The comic strips can teach us a thing or two. Charlie Brown's dog, Snoopy, is playing tennis. In picture one, Snoopy is shown with a brand new tennis racquet. Things, however, are not going well on the court. He's angry. In fact, we see him throw his racquet to the court, kick it and stomp on it. Finally, in great anguish he smashes it over the tennis net pole. In the final frame of the cartoon he is seen addressing a letter to the manufacturer,

"Gentlemen: Under separate cover I am returning to you a defective tennis racquet"

As someone has put it,

"It's not whether you win or lose that counts.
What counts is where you place the blame..."

We all know people who find it difficult to take responsibility for their own lives...they're always blaming circumstances or fate or some other people. Never themselves. Greta Garbo once confessed to an interviewer, "You know I've made a mess of my life". At least Ms. Garbo didn't blame someone else.

St. Paul says to Timothy, "Take hold of the 'eternal life' to which you were called". In other words, Tim...you were created for more than you are now experiencing. Take responsibility for your life, your decisions. Realize that you were called to greatness. Don't settle for the petty, pathetic life of people who are continually making excuses rather than making progress. And remember that you have infinite potential within you. Timothy, all you have to do is take hold of it!

On the trip home from the Nobel Prize ceremonies in Stockholm, prizewinning physicist, Richard Feynman stopped off in Queens and looked up his high school records. He commented on this, saying,

"My grades were not as good as I remember them to be and my IQ was 124 - considered just above average..."

"He was delighted," reported his wife, Gweneth. "He said to win a Nobel Prize was no big deal, but to win it with an IQ of 124....well....that was something."

And that is something. Richard Feynman did not let a slightly above average IQ hold him back. He took hold of the opportunities that life presented him and gave it his very best. He "fought a good fight" to use Paul's phrase. And think of how many people we know who also have opportunities settle for so much less. "Take hold of the 'eternal life' to which you were called", write Paul to Timothy.

Remember that moving scene in the movie, The Dead Poets Society, where John Keating, the English teacher (played by Robin Williams) takes his students into the hall to the trophy case and shows them pictures of heroes from the past history of the school. He says to them,

"All of these young men were as you are today, starting life with great promise. All of you will some day be as they are. They're all dead and so will you be. What do you think they would say to you? Get up close to the glass"

And as the class leans toward the glass, Robin Williams in a raspy voice says,

"Carpe diem...carpe diem...seize the day." Paul says to Timothy, "Fight the good fight."

THE IMPORTANCE OF RIGHTEOUS LIVING

to understand the importance of righteous living.

Second, we must not only take responsibility for our own lives, but we must also seek

Many years ago, the captain of a whaling vessel out in the North Atlantic is said to have spotted through his binoculars the hull of a ship which was obviously very old and run down.

It was surrounded by icebergs. The captain decided to investigate and and he approached the ship, the cries of his own crew, "Ship Ahoy" received no response. Upon boarding the vessel, they found the entire crew frozen, but well preserved. Even the captain of this icy ship was fully dressed and sat before his logbook at his desk. The last entry revealed that these men had been adrift for close to ten years, removed from ocean traffic in the cold, icy waters of the north Atlantic. A floating sepulcher, surrounded by icebergs, adrift on an ocean with nowhere to go.

It's amazing to me how similar are the lives of a lot of people today to the men who were aboard that frozen vessel. Good educations. Excellent family backgrounds. All the right equipment...but they are morally and spiritually adrift with nowhere to go. Arnold Toynbee, the English historian, in one of his volumes described the "sense of drift"...the carelessness of humanity about the loss of spiritual values. At times, we wonder, too, have we lost our way?

The great missionary - evangelist, E. Stanley Jones, was about to cross a street. A woman pulled on his arm and said, "Look at the red light". Jones replied rather weakly, "But look at the people going across". She replied, "Don't look at them...look at the light and follow it!" Good advice. But so many of us have quit looking at the light. We're content to watch other people and do as they do. Thus we remain adrift with no fixed point of reference.

Remember the book, The Caine Mutiny? Willie Keith, one of the characters, receives a letter from his father who is dying of an incurable disease. In the letter the father offered three bits of advice to his son.

"First" he said, "There is nothing...nothing more precious than time. Wasted hours destroy your life. Second, religion. I'm afraid I haven't given you much, but I think I will mail you a Bible before I go into the hospital. Get familiar with the words. You'll never regret it. I came to the Bible as I came to everything in life: too late! And third, Willie" he continued..."think of me as I might have been at the times in your life when you come to the crossroads. And for my sake, for the sake of a father who often took the wrong turns, take the right ones. And be a man, son. Love, Dad."

There are right turns and there are wrong turns. Paul says to Timothy,

"I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach."

Hidden away in the archives of the CBS News program, 60 Minutes, there's a most interesting interview that Mike Wallace did with presidential candidate, Richard Nixon. Here's how it went:

Mike Wallace. "There's been so much talk in recent years of style and charisma. No one suggests that either you or your opponent, Hubert Humphrey, has a good deal of it. Have you given any thought to this aspect of campaigning and of leading the American people?"

Richard Nixon. "Well, when style and charisma connote the idea of contriving, of public relations, I don't buy it at all. As I look back on the history of this country, some of our great leaders would not have been perhaps the great television personalities, but they were great Presidents for what they stood for...the most important thing about a public man is not whether he's loved or disliked but whether he's respected. And I hope to restore respect to the presidency at all levels by my conduct."

If only Richard Nixon had maintained that high standard. After all, his accomplishments were many. He opened the door to China. He was re-elected by an enormous majority. He might have gone down in our history books as an outstanding president. But instead, it all ended in disgrace.

Wrote St. Paul, "I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach". Understand the importance of righteous living. But let's move on.

A REPRESENTATIVE OF CHRIST

Finally, remember this that you are a representative of Christ. Every disciple is a witness - either a valued witness, or a detrimental one.

Our "Dream Team" of professional basketball players at the Olympics has made us aware once again celebrities endorsing products. Apparently they're taking those endorsements seriously because of the dollars involved, but that's not always the case. I remember when Darryl Dawkins, back in 1982, signed a contract with NIKE sneakers. Big bucks were involved. He was to receive something like \$50,000 a year for wearing NIKE sneakers when in uniform plus some additional bonus money for performance on the court. With Dawkins' contract in hand, NIKE had 20,000 posters of this immense star printed for distribution.

Remember what happened and how NIKE executives were "put out" and understandably so when Darryl showed up on the basketball court wearing shoes made by a major competitor. Not only were they "put out", but angry and promptly sued Dawkins the cost of the useless posters and punitive damages for fraud. And so it goes in the big-money world of professional sports and advertising. Some people have been known to endorse products they don't really use. Another athlete once wore shoes with one company's stripe on one side and another company's mark on the other side and tried to collect from both.

"When we caught him", they reported, "he said that if he'd had any more room, he would have tried three."

And to tell you the truth, it doesn't impress me very much any more when a celebrity endorses Christ. It use to and it may impress some people, but it doesn't touch me anymore. What does impress me is when a follower - any follower of Christ - genuinely tries - by the grace of God - to live a Christlike life.

Nothing is more beautiful or more compelling in this world of ours...more winning...than that! You and I are representatives of Jesus Christ. Remember that.

CLOSING There's an old Eastern fable that speaks of a man who possessed a ring with a beautiful opal. The ring bestowed upon the wearer qualities such a kindness and truthfulness and bravery and justice - all the qualities to make a man much loved.

The ring was passed from father to son until it happened that a man had three sons. Before his death he had two copies made so each of his sons would have a ring. The sons were disturbed. How would they ever know which had the original? They took the matter to court and the judge said,

"We will know who has the genuine ring
by the goodness of his life!"

Somehow I believe that is also how we know that Christ genuinely lives in a person's heart. "The goodness of his life."

These, then, are the qualities of a determined disciple of Christ. First: take responsibility for your life. You were created for a higher kind of living, call it "kingdom living". Second, recognize the importance of righteous, Christlike living, and third: remember always that you are a representative of Christ.

LAY READER: Jeanne Martini

DATE: August 9, 1992



BEFORE

"The Scripture Reading for today is taken from _____

 LETTER OF PAUL TO TIMOTHY / FIRST TIMOTHY

Chapter 6 Verses 11-23

It is found on page 1036 in the Bible that is in the pews.

(READER: Take note...after announcing where the reading is found, PAUSE for about 10 seconds before beginning to read. Enough people turn to the Bible to follow along...give them time to find the passage. Then start in...project... Keep your voice "up")

AFTER (Sign off with.....)

"Thus endeth the reading taken from the Holy Scripture.
May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word and
to our understanding of it.
Thanks be to God! Amen!"

(Careful walking up...and careful walking down. We don't want any accidents...walk slowly.)

*Take time to learn to
read the Scriptures
well.*

Worship

A hush falls over the congregation. The worshipers are sitting in rapt attention.

The reader walks to the lectern and looks up. Something important is about to happen. You can tell by the way the listeners lean forward slightly, their eyes open wide, their ears attuned. The reader begins to speak, "A reading from the book of *Exodus*."

Is that the kind of anticipation that rivets your congregation's attention when the Scriptures are about to be read? Or are the lessons a time to take a nap or let our minds drift a million miles away?

In every service of worship the Scriptures are read. Often, several passages are read in the course of a service. These do not include the acts of worship that have been selected or adapted from biblical texts. If reading the Scriptures aloud in the gathered community of faith is so important, we need to take time to do it well.

The reading of the Scripture lessons is essential for effective worship; yet, few pastors or lay readers receive preparation for reading them with confidence.

Here are a few suggestions to help you prepare to read the Scriptures aloud in worship.

First, read the lesson several times. Read it aloud, even if you are alone. Pay close attention to the sounds of the words as well as their meanings. If

there are words whose meanings you do not know, look them up.

Second, find the attitude of the speaker of the passage. Is the lesson simply giving information? Is the speaker happy or angry? Is the speaker attempting to comfort or challenge the listeners? Practice reading the lesson aloud so your reading reveals the attitude of the speaker whose words you are reading.

Third, mark the words you need to stress in your reading. Underline once the words that deserve a moderate stress, and draw two lines under words that should receive greater emphasis. Practice reading the passage, stressing each word appropriately until the reading feels and sounds natural.

Fourth, mark the places you wish to pause in the reading. Mark brief pauses with one thin slash mark (/) and more sustained pauses with a bolder slash mark. Practice reading the passage, including the appropriate pauses, until the reading feels and sounds natural.

Finally, each lesson is meaningful and should be read as if it means something. What is the sense of the passage? How is that sense communicated through the attitude of the speaker, the stressed words and the pauses? Practice reading the passage until the sense of the lesson is expressed in a way that feels and sounds natural.

Reading of Scripture is important to our worship. Let us work to read well.

—*Michael E. Williams*

"DETERMINED DISCIPLESHIP"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
August 9, 1992

"DETERMINED DISCIPLESHIP"

INTRODUCTION

Fact is often stranger than fiction. For instance, when authorities in Baldwin, Wisconsin finally caught up with some local cattle rustlers, it turned out that the rustlers had been carrying off calves in the back of a Chevrolet Chevette. That meant loading calves up to to 600 pounds through the rear hatch of a tiny car. You have to admire their determination. Those rustlers were willing to work hard for what they stole. While a number of people might be tempted to load stray cattle into a pick-up truck, few would be tempted to do it with a small Chevy. We appreciate people with determination whenever or wherever we encounter them.

St. Paul had that same kind of determination in mind when he told young Timothy to go out and to "fight the good fight". Of course, St. Paul here is talking about a very special "good fight". He's talking about the "good fight" of being a worthy disciple of Christ. Real discipleship can be costly. It is for persons of drive and daring, for persons of courage and character, for persons of faith and fearlessness.

Let's think about some of the qualities of a determined disciple of Christ. From our text for the day, we can settle on three characteristics that are essential and perhaps you can add to these a few of your own.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR LIFE

First of all, we have to learn to take responsibility for our own lives.

The comic strips can teach us a thing or two. Charlie Brown's dog, Snoopy, is playing tennis. In picture one, Snoopy is shown with a brand new tennis racquet. Things, however, are not going well on the court. He's angry. In fact, we see him throw his racquet to the court, kick it and stomp on it. Finally, in great anguish he smashes it over the tennis net pole. In the final frame of the cartoon he is seen addressing a letter to the manufacturer,

"Gentlemen: Under separate cover I am returning to you a defective tennis racquet"

As someone has put it,

"It's not whether you win or lose that counts.
What counts is where you place the blame..."

We all know people who find it difficult to take responsibility for their own lives...they're always blaming circumstances or fate or some other people. Never themselves. Greta Garbo once confessed to an interviewer, "You know I've made a mess of my life". At least Ms. Garbo didn't blame someone else.

St. Paul says to Timothy, "Take hold of the 'eternal life' to which you were called". In other words, Tim...you were created for more than you are now experiencing. Take responsibility for your life, your decisions. Realize that you were called to greatness. Don't settle for the petty, pathetic life of people who are continually making excuses rather than making progress. And remember that you have infinite potential within you. Timothy, all you have to do is take hold of it!

On the trip home from the Nobel Prize ceremonies in Stockholm, prizewinning physicist, Richard Feynman stopped off in Queens and looked up his high school records. He commented on this, saying,

"My grades were not as good as I remember them to be and my IQ was 124 - considered just above average..."

"He was delighted," reported his wife, Gweneth. "He said to win a Nobel Prize was no big deal, but to win it with an IQ of 124....well....that was something."

And that is something. Richard Feynman did not let a slightly above average IQ hold him back. He took hold of the opportunities that life presented him and gave it his very best. He "fought a good fight" to use Paul's phrase. And think of how many people we know who also have opportunities who settle for so much less. "Take hold of the 'eternal life' to which you were called", wrote Paul to Timothy.

Remember that moving scene in the movie, The Dead Poets Society, where John Keating, the English teacher (played by Robin Williams) takes his students into the hall to the trophy case and shows them pictures of heroes from the past history of the school. He says to them,

"All of these young men were as you are today, starting life with great promise. All of you will some day be as they are. They're all dead and so will you be. What do you think they would say to you? Get up close to the glass"

And as the class leans toward the glass, Robin Williams in a raspy voice says,

"Carpe diem...carpe diem...seize the day." Paul says to Timothy, "Fight the good fight."

THE IMPORTANCE OF RIGHTEOUS LIVING

Second, we must not only take responsibility for our own lives, but we must also seek to understand the importance of righteous living.

Many years ago, the captain of a whaling vessel out in the North Atlantic is said to have spotted through his binoculars the hull of a ship which was obviously very old and run down.

It was surrounded by icebergs. The captain decided to investigate and as he approached the ship, the cries of his own crew, "Ship Ahoy" received no response. Upon boarding the vessel, they found the entire crew frozen, but well preserved. Even the captain of this icy ship was fully dressed and sat before his logbook at his desk. The last entry revealed that these men had been adrift for close to ten years, removed from ocean traffic in the cold, icy waters of the north Atlantic. A floating sepulcher, surrounded by icebergs, adrift on an ocean with nowhere to go.

It's amazing to me how similar are the lives of a lot of people today to the men who were aboard that frozen vessel. Good educations. Excellent family backgrounds. All the right equipment...but they are morally and spiritually adrift with nowhere to go. Arnold Toynbee, the English historian, in one of his volumes described the "sense of drift"...the carelessness of humanity about the loss of spiritual values. At times, we wonder, too, have we lost our way?

The great missionary - evangelist, E. Stanley Jones, was about to cross a street. A woman pulled on his arm and said, "Look at the red light". Jones replied rather weakly, "But look at the people going across". She replied, "Don't look at them...look at the light and follow it!" Good advice. But so many of us have quit looking at the light. We're content to watch other people and do as they do. Thus we remain adrift with no fixed point of reference.

Remember the book, The Caine Mutiny? Willie Keith, one of the characters, receives a letter from his father who is dying of an incurable disease. In the letter the father offered three bits of advice to his son.

"First" he said, "There is nothing...nothing more precious than time. Wasted hours destroy your life. Second, religion. I'm afraid I haven't given you much, but I think I will mail you a Bible before I go into the hospital. Get familiar with the words. You'll never regret it. I came to the Bible as I came to everything in life: too late! And third, Willie" he continued..."think of me as I might have been at the times in your life when you come to the crossroads. And for my sake, for the sake of a father who often took the wrong turns, take the right ones. And be a man, son. Love, Dad."

There are right turns and there are wrong turns. Paul says to Timothy,

"I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach."

Hidden away in the archives of the CBS News program, 60 Minutes, there's a most interesting interview that Mike Wallace did with presidential candidate, Richard Nixon. Here's how it went:

Mike Wallace. "There's been so much talk in recent years of style and charisma. No one suggests that either you or your opponent, Hubert Humphrey, has a good deal of it. Have you given any thought to this aspect of campaigning and of leading the American people?"

Richard Nixon. "Well, when style and charisma connote the idea of contriving, of public relations, I don't buy it at all. As I look back on the history of this country, some of our great leaders would not have been perhaps the great television personalities, but they were great Presidents for what they stood for...the most important thing about a public man is not whether he's loved or disliked but whether he's respected. And I hope to restore respect to the presidency at all levels by my conduct."

If only Richard Nixon had maintained that high standard. After all, his accomplishments were many. He opened the door to China. He was re-elected by an enormous majority. He might have gone down in our history books as an outstanding president. But instead, it all ended in disgrace.

Wrote St. Paul, "I charge you to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach". Understand the importance of righteous living. But let's move on.

A REPRESENTATIVE OF CHRIST

Finally, remember this that you are a representative of Christ. Every disciple is a witness - either a valued witness, or a detrimental one. What kind of a witness are you?

Our "Dream Team" of professional basketball players at the Olympics has made us aware once again of celebrities endorsing products. Apparently they're taking those endorsements seriously because of the dollars involved, but that's not always the case. I remember when Darryl Dawkins, back in 1982, signed a contract with NIKE sneakers. Big bucks were involved. He was to receive something like \$50,000 a year for wearing NIKE sneakers when in uniform plus some additional bonus money for performance on the court. With Dawkins' contract in hand, NIKE had 20,000 posters of this immense star printed for distribution.

Remember what happened and how NIKE executives were "put out" and understandably so when Darryl showed up on the basketball court wearing shoes made by a major competitor. Not only were they "put out", but angry and promptly sued Dawkins the cost of the useless posters and punitive damages for fraud. And so it goes in the big-money world of professional sports and advertising. Some people have been known to endorse products they don't really use. Another athlete once wore shoes with one company's stripe on one side and another company's mark on the other side and tried to collect from both.

"When we caught him", they reported, "he said that if he'd had any more room, he would have tried three."

And to tell you the truth, it doesn't impress me very much any more when a celebrity endorses Christ. It use to and it may impress some people, but it doesn't touch me anymore. What does impress me is when a follower - any follower of Christ - genuinely tries... by the grace of God - to live a Christlike life.

Nothing is more beautiful or more compelling in this world of ours...more winning...than that! You and I are representatives of Jesus Christ. Are we guilty of endorsing a product that we aren't really using. Think about it.

CLOSING

There's an old Eastern fable that speaks of a man who possessed a ring with a beautiful opal. The ring bestowed upon the wearer qualities such a kindness and truthfulness and bravery and justice - all the qualities to make a man much loved.

The ring was passed from father to son until it happened that a man had three sons. Before his death he had two copies made so each of his sons would have a ring. The sons were disturbed. How would they ever know which had the original? They took the matter to court and the judge said,

"We will know who has the genuine ring
by the goodness of his life!"

Somehow I believe that is also how we know that Christ genuinely lives in a person's heart. "The goodness of his life."

These, then, are the qualities of a determined disciple of Christ. First: take responsibility for your life. You were created for a higher kind of living, call it "kingdom living". Second, recognize the importance of righteous, Christlike living, and third: remember always that you are a representative of Christ. Are you a good endorsement of that Man from Nazareth?

PRAYER

Lord, speak to us, that we may speak to others in living echoes of Your tone...strengthen us that we may stand firm on the rock and strong in You. Teach us that we may teach others of the precious things You have imparted to us. And wing our words that we may reach the hidden depths of many a heart. Fill us. Use us, Lord until that day when we see Your blessed face. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, August 9, 1992

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of greeting to the visitors who have joined us here this morning in worship. Delighted. We invite you to join us in a bit of fellowship, too...following the service downstairs in the Russell room.
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out a visitor card or sign one of the guest books. Come, worship with us on other Sundays. Come, work with us, too, in the outreach concerns of our Church
- C. Remember, there's no such thing as a "Lone Ranger" Christian in this city. Find new friends. Find a home with us.

QUIET MONTH

- A. August is a quiet month in our church. Indeed, summer always brings a different rhythm to our lives and the life of our church. With fewer people and a less frenetic pace, our Summer Sundays offer a wonderful opportunity for us to get to know each other better. Enjoy a leisurely brunch or a stroll through the park or a museum visit with a church friend.
- B. Lynn and I will be leaving for three weeks of vacation time in Ocean Park, Maine. We'll be leaving on Thursday and will be back the Saturday before Labor Day...and will be here on Labor Day Sunday.
- C. Duane Thompson, our student assistant, will be handling the services the next three Sundays...and will be around during the week to cover any emergencies. Our thanks to Stephanie Douglas for singing this morning and also to Vaughn Watson for his ministry to us at the organ console these Summer Sundays.
- D. Our attendance is "holding"...averaging just over 100 so far this Summer...wonderful. Keep it up. I'm sure you will! We'll post today's attendance number on the board as you go downstairs to the coffee hour.

PASTORAL

- A. Alton Slagle...longtime member and friend....

OFFERING: "It is more blessed to give than to receive"

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, August 9, 1992 / Supplement

PICK UP

Be sure to PICK UP your copy of the August issue of our monthly news sheet...out in the narthex and also on the table in the Russell Room. And take along a copy of the August calendar with you....something that we're putting out each month. It carries birthdays as well as the preaching schedule and any events or meeting that are "in the works".

Please note that the Adult Fellowship will gather at 6:30 tomorrow evening on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art - northeast end - to attend the NY Philharmonic concert together.....tomorrow evening. And then on Wednesday, our softball team will go up against Christ Church UM and Riverside Church at 7 pm, Field 5...on Central Park's great lawn....

FLOWERS

Our thanks to Jeanne Martini for the altar flowers in celebration of her grandson's ninth birthday - today.... Jeanne is the youngest looking grandmother I know...and celebrates her own birthday two weeks from today!

LIFT UP IN PRAYER

Add Alton Slagle - long time member of our church and a reporter at the Daily News - to the list of people to be "lifted up" in prayer....St. Vincent's hospital...in serious condition. I've known Al 35 years...we both came to NYC about the same time and he's had a fine career with the News.