2002 Kick off Dinner

"Our goal is to stay within the boundaries of God's plan for us."
2002-03 Verse of the Year -- II Corinthians 10:13

We are ready to begin a school year that will be marked by two remarkable milestones for Belhaven College.

- First, we will reach 2,000 students enrolled, which is a doubling of our enrollment in just six years.

- Second, we are significantly expanding the physical boundaries of the College, with the acquisition of the church on Riverside Drive that is now the Belhaven College Arts Center.

I am told by some of those who know our history, that originally, the boundaries of the College extended all the way from our present campus to the Pearl River, and that area was used for horseback riding. Through a pine tree forest, our land had arches covered with white Cherokee Roses, which is where our alma mater gets the verse -

> "We love thy stately pine tree, thy stainless Cherokee, like that clear glow, so may we grow, as strong and stainless we."

But, as tough economic challenges came, the school sold off portions of land in order to meet the pressing obligations. And I'm glad they did, or we wouldn't be here today.

With hundreds of acres sold off, we have learned to work pretty well within our limited 43 acres – and still save the lake. But, now expanding those boundaries to include this wonderful new building will be a blessing as we grow in size and significance. (And the walk up the hill will be good for most of us)

Thinking about this significant expanding our physical boundaries, I was impressed to chose for this year a theme verse which reminds us that our boundaries are not of our own making, but our boundaries are a gift from God.

- As Paul and Timothy write to the Christians in Greece, " *Our goal is to stay within the boundaries of God's plan for us*."

As we begin a year when God has entrusted us with significant new physical and enrollment boundaries, I am convinced these new boundaries have come to us, ONLY because we've been good stewards of what God has given us in the past.

In every new thing that has come our way through these years, there is a complex story of how, it was God, who set the new boundary for us.

God gave us the Church on Riverside Drive, and the limit of time keeps me from recounting again the chain of remarkable steps that brought it about. Events which only God could orchestrate.

In the same way, God has allowed us to double the enrollment in just six years, and that enrollment growth is just as clearly guided the hand of the Lord.

Our goal should be not in reaching for new boundaries, or looking with envy at those who have different boundaries than us. But, our ONLY goal is to stay within the boundaries of God's plan for us.

And I believe we do that by:

- Knowing our boundaries instead of wandering.
- Embracing our boundaries instead of resisting,
- Fulfilling our boundaries instead of care-taking.

First, we need to KNOW our boundaries and not wander.

My neighbors have an electronic fence for their dog. That dog is happiest when he remembers his boundaries, for if he forgets and wanders, the consequences are unpleasant.

Individually or as a College we can get shocked when we go outside of God's boundaries, so it is vital that we know the clearly marked stakes of our property line. Because we can't care for what God has entrusted to us, if we don't know where it begins and ends.

Which leads us to the key understanding our Godly boundaries –

- Boundaries are not limits to accentuate what we don't have
- Rather, *boundaries are the defining of God's opportunities for us*.

As a College, God has allowed us to care for a portion of His world, and as we have been good stewards, he continues to push out those boundaries and sharpen our vision.

Clearly outlining the property line of our boundaries is the first step in fulfilling God's plan for us. Because when we know our boundaries, we understand our opportunities.

As the old song goes, it is good to "count your blessings and name them one-by-one", for they are the outline of God's plan for us. And, when I took time to count our blessing with the Administrative Team a few weeks ago, the list is nothing short of remarkable. Let me briefly summarize them with 13 boundary stakes:

1) God has given us a faculty who believe God's word, and integrates it into every academic discipline. They are people who invest in students because they are committed to teaching and mentoring as a ministry. They will do whatever it takes to help a student succeed and are pragmatic in their view, adjusting policies or programs to meet the needs of a new opportunity.

They are committed to quality without being exclusive. And, against the nature of faculties both inside and outside Christian higher education, they live out their faith by putting energy into their ministry rather than the backbiting and power struggles that are draining the life from too many campuses. We are blessed with a truly remarkable faculty.

2) God has given us a core curriculum that sets us apart from all of higher education. We have academic leaders who are not restricted by tradition. and a faculty who can make this curriculum work effectively. I believe, our World View Curriculum will become one of our great contributions to Christian education, and a hallmark of Belhaven.

3) God has given us a campus that makes us proud thanks to a maintenance team that is systematically improving sections of the campus and by being responsive to our most immediate needs. We have five new buildings in just six years, while enriching the charm of our historical setting.

And, all of us have been surprised by the impact of the new student center in strengthening relationships and setting a different tone for the campus. We have a security effort that understands that a significant security problem would unravel all we are doing.

4) God has given us an adult education program that is second-to-none. It meets the needs of working students where they are, but has not given away academic integrity to do so. In Jackson, we are so strong that the community college now targets us with a billboard. Our campus in Memphis has finally caught fire, with enrollment taking off this summer. Orlando continues steady growth, returning a positive balance to the budget and serving 150 students we'd never reach had we not gone there.

And, maybe most importantly, we have a campus and a board that doesn't see Adult Education as second class but understands the value of ministering to all students, regardless of their age.

5) God has given us an Arts program that is becoming one of a kind in the entire world. We are the only evangelical college anywhere, with majors in all four of the primary arts: dance, theatre, music, and art.

Most Christian colleges are scared to death to touch the Arts, but Belhaven has been blessed with all the right combination of factors and leadership which make it possible for us to become the leader in preparing students to redeem the arts. And we have a relationship with China that is at the highest levels of governmental leadership impacting that nation with the love of Christ.

6) Along with our remarkable Arts division, God has given us a broad array of strong academic majors that prepare students well. We have a science department that produces top graduates who understand the complexity of God's creation. We have a business department that believes ethics is not a theoretical study and a communications department that stair-steps students into their first job.

We have English, and History departments that challenge issues of faith in the harsh reality of the patterns of life. We have computer science and math departments that must be good because few of us understand or want to understand them. We have sports applications that are cutting-edge for Christian colleges.

We have an education department that tops the charts year after year. We have a Bible and Philosophy department that builds up faith, rather than tears it down. And, as a psych major myself, I'm especially proud that we have a psychology department that is academically rigorous and, to be blunt, is not weird like most of them are.

7) God has given us a more stable financial foundation. This summer was the first summer – maybe ever – that the college did not need to borrow money for cash flow to make it through the lean months. We had a good year-end financially.
We have a budget management process that is more complete than we've ever enjoyed. Our past-due student collections have dropped in six years from several hundred thousand dollars to just a few thousand dollars. We spent within our budget this year, and took in more revenue than we had anticipated.

Our information technology has mushroomed in just a few years, but we are able to still control it, rather than the computers controlling us. Our financial aid office helps students in need without giving away the store. We refinanced our capital debt last year in a way that is saving us huge amounts of money.

8) God has given us a new spirit among our alumni. They are proud of their College. The alumni's stories of hurts from the past are not shared in whispers or anger as they were a few years ago. The giving participation among alumni has doubled in just three years. The people of Jackson are proud and curious about Belhaven. The news media seeks out our people as experts. Pastors are finding ways to promote us, rather than ignore us.

Our public information being received well, and we have one of the best web sites of any college anywhere. Our admissions team is being welcomed into schools and they are overwhelmed with inquires on the internet.

Our development effort is producing record level giving by building partner relationships with our friends. And, the perception has shifted 180 degres so that Belhaven is no longer seen as the weak sister in this town, but in fact is leading the way.

9) We have an Administrative Team who are experienced and effective. These are men and women who are each strong enough to let me hear the value of their viewpoint, but care more about the best for institution than they do their area of responsibility, so that they rally around a decision when a direction is set.

And, we have a board who cares deeply for the College, gives sacrificially, and is always ultra careful to lead through setting policy, not by managing. Unlike many of my peers, I've never had to question their willingness to shoot completely straight with me, while being totally supportive of me during the times of toughest challenge.

10) I've been around college athletics for a long time, and God has given us something positive in that area that is nothing short of remarkable – especially in light of our terrible lows of six years ago. Because coaches are spending so many late nights recruiting on the telephone, every roster is full. Faculty and coaches are working together to assure academic preparedness in their players.

Our athletic scholarships are lower than nearly every team we face and still we are competitive.
The focus of coaches is not on what we don't have, but making the most of the resources we do have.
Players are being taught service and character, and the spiritual development of every team is strong.

11) God has given us a positive student life ministry that is hard to measure, but we know it when we see it – and it is good. Last year for the first time ever we did not dismiss a single student for discipline reasons. There are quality programs going on in our residence halls that are challenging students with some of the toughest dilemmas of growing up.

We are getting aggressive in helping students at risk, both through personal counseling, and with a "Student Success Team" that is creating avenues to be proactive in helping all our students have an good chance at academic success.

12) God has given us a great gift in our location, in a safe historic neighborhood, but with all the benefits of a metro area. And we have a spirit of cooperation and teamwork with our neighborhood leaders that keeps us from the town vs. gown stress of most campuses. We serve in a state that was the center of great racial turmoil not many years ago, but is now the most aggressive in genuine racial reconciliation.

And I believe with all my heart, that God put Belhaven College in Mississippi on purpose. Our state has both real-challenges and outdated assumptions that will not go away anytime soon, and the academic preparedness of incoming students will always be a struggle. But, we were put here to serve this place.

And today, we need to treasure that God has given a marvelous gift to Belhaven, as the most diverse evangelical college in the country. By race, age, and spiritual background, we top the chart. We have "not created a false world" is what a political and church leader from the Caribbean observed about us this summer when he was on campus.

13) Finally, God has given us a spiritual vitality inside and outside the classroom. Our spiritual tone is high, meaningful, thoughtful, and broad. We have a theological stability to be cherished, with our focus on the Lord Jesus, rather than theological distinctives.

We are learning how to truly live the principle, "*in the essentials, unity; in the non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love,"* so that students of all spiritual backgrounds can be strengthen at Belhaven College. We have Bible studies and prayer meetings all across the campus and among clubs and teams, and a commitment to prayer among faculty and staff that is extraordinary. We have friends around the country praying for us daily through our Prayer Lights email.

We have a weekly chapel service that is uplifting, bringing us together in meaningful worship. And. now, with adequate seating in the new building, the time is right to make this a shared experience for us all each week. This fall, I want us to close down the entire campus on Tuesday mornings at 11:00 so that all of us can worship together in chapel.

We are making arrangements to close every administrative office, stop all maintenance projects, not hold any meetings, turn off all the phones -- so that (other than just a handful of security people) – every single one of us can worship together once a week. And there should be no more important priority in our to-do list.

When we consider the 13 boundary stakes that God has entrusted to Belhaven College, all we can say is -- To God be the glory, great things he has done – great boundaries he has given to us.

If we see boundaries as limits, we work in frustration. But, if we see them as blessings and opportunities, then we can enjoy our boundaries. And when we review this list, we have to be amazed how God has given us some mighty big boundaries to enjoy.

So second, we need to EMBRACE our boundaries and not resist them.

I'll have to admit to you that my backyard needs work. MaryLou thinks we need a new yard-man, but I like the one we have because he works for free, and besides I need the exercise.

But every time I try to start working in the back yard, I notice the neighbor has a great back yard so I spend some time admiring what he has, that I don't have.

- Or I see my other neighbor has some nice hedges so I go study those for a while.
- Or I see the kids left toys all over the yard and I spend some time explaining to them how they are making my work harder.
- Or I go offer advice on the grass at the Belhaven's baseball field, for that's a lot more fun than working on my own grass.

But, my backyard still needs work …. in fact, it needs more work than it did before.

Colleges will always be frustrated if they resist against their own boundaries,– assuming that it is over the fence where the grass really does grow. But, looking "out," rather than "in" is not only fruitless – it is not Godly. Our desire must be to stay within the boundaries of God's plan for us – whatever they may be – and to embrace those boundaries.

God will always provide a way when we learn to embrace our boundaries rather than wishing and struggling to get something that God has not given to us.

I hear periodically, that Belhaven should be the "Wheaton of the South." I don't usually say it out loud, but my answer is: "why would we want to be?" Those aren't the boundaries that God has given to us. We have so much they don't have – they would love to have our diversity, our arts program, our world view curriculum, our ability to make academic shifts quickly … that list can go on.

But they have much that we don't have in international reputation, a long tradition of evangelical thinking, a gigantic endowment, broad graduate programs … and that list can go on. And they have snow and ice while our azaleas are blooming.

Our goal is to stay within the boundaries of God's plan for us … and as we enjoy living within those boundaries, God will continue to move the boundary markers in his timeframe. Just we have watched him do in very dramatic ways during these recent years.

Our responsibility is to embrace, enjoy, and work within the boundaries of the moment. Because God's boundaries are never wrong.

Most of you don't know about the difficult times of Belhaven's past. Because we've doubled our number of full time faculty and staff, I was surprised to learn the other day that, of our 180 full time employees, only 29 of you were here when I came just six and a half years ago.

But, it wasn't very long ago that our boundaries were incredibly small, even to the point that less than fifteen years ago the board seriously considered closing, selling, or merging the College.

But, through Godly leading in some courageous decisions of the 1980s, the Lord has broadened our boundaries, even when moving those boundaries was an agonizing effort. And it took a long time to shift some of those boundaries and change the core of the College so that they were embraced and enjoyed.

That process is what has laid the foundation for the many new boundaries we have today. But, even until the most recent years, our boundaries have tended to be feel restrictive more than freeing.

And while smaller boundaries may not be enjoyable to our personal desires, they can be embraced because we have assurance they are always God's boundaries.

Let me tell you a story that I thought I'd never tell publically until I would someday leave Belhaven. But, I've been through some exploration of God's boundaries in my personal life, and I've become convinced that the Lord plans for me to be here a very long time. So I may be too old to remember the story by the time I do leave here.

And I want to tell you the details of this tipping point moment for the College for it shows how clearly God has lead us by using boundaries we don't always want to embrace.

It happened at the time of our SACS accreditation review in the fall of 1996. I hadn't been here that long and had come from the middle part of the country where an accrediting review process is fairly insignificant. Belhaven had a team of people who had worked very hard on our report and as the interim president Dan Fredericks had made some hard decisions to help us clean up some of our toughest areas during a time of leadership transition. But there were still lots of challenges.

We all knew we had much to do especially in gaining financial footing, and in my mind, I had laid out a long slow process of recovery that would take about a decade.

Well, the visiting team came in with their army of 13 peer evaluators that looked us over inside-and-out. As their visit continued, we started getting signs that things were not going well at all.

On the final day of their visit, SACS has a tradition of holding a rather unusual final session where they invite us in and read their list of recommendations, but don't allow us to respond or ask questions. So a number of us gathered in what was then our nicest room on campus, in the bottom floor of the Fine Arts building, to hear the verdict.

I'd been warned by the SACS leaders earlier that morning that the report was going to be tough, and Gretchen Cook who chaired our team, reminded me the other day that I whispered to her "brace yourself" as she went into the meeting.

While all of us were getting seated, the SACS leaders asked me to go to a side room to talk privately, and laid a boundary down that shook me to the core. They told me that after a long late night, struggling discussion among the review team, they had decided it was doubtful that Belhaven College could make it financially.

They were convinced that, at best, we had no more than three years before we would need to close the doors.

But they wanted to give us a chance. So, on a split vote they agreed to NOT put us probation immediately because our financial problems. Instead, they would privately give us one year, and no more, to make significant progress or they would come back and take dramatic action – which probably would have closed the College for sure.

God's boundaries are never wrong, although I was devastated, terribly frustrated, and wanting to know what in the world the Lord had gotten me into. But about three weeks later, I remember very clearly coming to the understanding that this was God's boundary, not SACS, and it was a boundary to embrace, not resist.

I probably spent seventy five percent of my time the that next year on finance. We compressed a multi year plan into one year. We cut and pasted; we did without; we invested in those things that would be financially productive long-term, and we raised all the unrestricted money we could find.

We took some huge risks because there was not much to lose at that point – although I never told publicly how big the risk really was for fear that would send us into a cut and slash mode, which was an approach I was positive would kill the college for sure.

Stuart Irby, our board chair, carried some heavy loads with me that year as we consulted on this and he has a wonderful way of summarizing a challenge in an
Xxxxxx , I'll never forget him saying, "we have so much risked on this one rocket launch, at least they will notice us if it blows up."

And a year later, when I went to Atlanta to see the SACS leaders to report, we were far from out of the woods, but we had made enough progress that the boundary was expanded just a bit to give us a little more room to move. And it has expanded every year since as we've made some great strides financially.

I am convinced, that had that boundary not been laid down, we never would have made the hard decisions, taken the big risks, or invested in the new programs that have gotten us to where we are today.

It may have been the most significant boundary we've ever had.

And, for me, the turning point came when I saw it was God's boundary, not SACS, and started embracing it instead of being frustrated by it.

When we learn to embrace our boundaries rather than being frustrated by then, it is then we can get a vision for the plan God has for us. **And that plan is this: (3) we need to fulfill our boundaries, not just be caretakers of what God has entrusted to us.**

Let me tell you frankly what I think the biggest obstacle is right now for Belhaven College. I'm sure you can imagine all types of challenges that might make the list, but this one overwhelms all the others by far.

Our biggest problem is that today, Belhaven College has become a **good school**.

We have a solid academic program, we have a broad base of students, we have our bills paid, we have new buildings to enjoy, we have some wonderful supporters, and we have some high points to brag about.

It would be very easy for us to say we have made it and be satisfied. Because God has been glorified through the progress, and students are receiving a good education with us.

But if we are only caretakers of what God has entrusted to us, rather than fulfilling our boundaries completely, we will have squandered God's plan for us. And we will surely see the end to our boundaries being expanded.

Jesus made clear in the parable of the talents, what he thinks of those who believe care-taking is good enough.

We are a good college today, but when we know the boundaries that God has laid down for us, and we embrace them, there is no reason that we cannot fulfill them completely and become a great college.

I've been studying this summer a fascinating five year research project that looked at the Fortune 500 companies that have moved from being good to being great. In a book by that title, Jim Collins and a team of researches have identified the factors that separate the good from the great, and their analysis is an important focus for us as well because it is built on research into great organizations not just opinions.

Essentially, the heart of the matter falls down to three intersecting circles that must be the boundaries of great companies or great colleges.

I want to have some extensive discussion across the campus during this year about these three circles, but as I've reflected on them, let me share with you where I see us.

The first circle of great organizations is: <u>what are we are passionate about</u>? What we are passionate about, is what I would call, "Christian higher education done right." It would take my speeches from the past three kick off dinners to unpack that phrase, but I believe we know that Christian higher education has missed the mark on too many campuses. But we have the factors going here to do it right – both inside and outside the classroom.

This summer we had a team develop a new advertisement for our student recruitment publications. It is built around the theme that there should be a Christian college that does it right, and Belhaven is that option.

read the ad

We have so many advantages, and the core of what drives us all, is we are doing something very different in how we interact with students, and, I pray, how we interact with each other.

The next circle of *Good to Great* is: <u>at what could we be the best in the world</u>? And from my looking ahead for Belhaven, that circle includes operating in two arenas that you might think are totally different directions. But I don't think they are at all, for one strengthens the other, because both come from the same unique set of three boundaries –

(1) we have a richness in our Mississippi location,

(2) a clearness in our evangelical commitment, and

(3) we do not have the limitations of denominational ownership.

And so I believe God is leading us to be the best in the world at fulfilling these unique boundaries in two distinct, but interlocking ways:

> First, I have become convinced that God wants Belhaven College to be the world's leading Evangelical College in the Arts. We are becoming prepared to lead the world in restoring the arts to the Church, and preparing our students to restore truth and beauty in the world.
>
> Second, as I look across the south and the nature of most of the denominational southern schools, I believe we can be the very best option for Evangelical southern students who want a liberal arts education.

And, to answer the question before you ask it, no, on the whole I don't think we should be a College for the entire country.

I believe that the south is unique in its character and God put us here, to serve students from Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee, Florida, Georgia and other southern leaning areas who need and appreciate the contrast of Belhaven against some of the negative stereotyping of the south. God gave us this boundary as the only southern evangelical college which is not denominationally owned-- let's embrace it and fulfill it by striving to serve well where God planted us.

The final circle of "Good to Great" asks the question: <u>what dives our economic engine</u>? I believe it is two factors, one that is built off the other.

Primarily, our <u>reputation</u> as a Christ-centered College that does things right is the primary driver of our economic engine long term. From relationships in the classroom, to relationships built all around the world, our reputation grows when there are quality results behind what we promise. <u>Everything</u> from how the buildings are maintained to the strength of our faculty impacts that reputation.

But what most immediately drives our economic engine is our well respected adult education program in Jackson, Memphis, and Orlando. It is through the success of this program that we are able to invest in so many other areas of the college, which on their own are not yet financially self-sustaining.

If we are to be a great college, and not simply a good one, the research of "Good to Great" shows that it is fulfilling these three circles (however they might eventually get defined) that will allow us to become great

But past the Good to Great study we are guided by Biblical principles which demand that we each personally fulfill the boundaries that God has entrusted to us, not simply be care-takers. This is as true for our major policy decisions, as it is for how we each uses every hour of every day.

> Jesus parable about fulfilling boundaries ends like this, "the servant who had received two talents, reported, 'Sir, you gave me two talents to invest, and I have doubled the amount.' The master said, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!'

> Then the servant with the one talent came to report, "I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth and here it is.' "But the master replied, 'You wicked and lazy servant! You should at least have put my money into the bank so I could have some interest. Take the money from this servant and give it to the one with the ten talents. To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance.
>
> But from those who are unfaithful, even what little they have, will be taken away. Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We cannot afford to be care-takers, but must be fulfilling our boundaries every day.

Is every classroom experience the very best it could be, or is it easy to just be good because you've done it enough times? Is every interaction with a student the most productive it could be, or is it just better than what they would get other places?

Is every student treated with respect and dignity? Is every opportunity to help a student captured? Is every administrative function done the best it could be because you're determined to fulfill your boundaries, or is it enough that you're naturally good at what you do?

If we want to honor God, we must always be pushing to fulfill the boundaries of what He has entrusted to us – and we must do it every day.

Some of us might be ready to breath a sigh of relief thinking this is a function of only those on the front line of the educational process. But, I don't see anywhere that God instructs faculty, coaches, and resident directors to be good stewards of their talent and doesn't demand the same of those in the business office, the admissions office, the development team, or the maintenance team.

Any one of us who does not fulfill the boundary that God has entrusted to us, will keep all of us from fulfilling God's plan for Belhaven.

This point was driven home to me early this summer when MaryLou and I needed to buy some little furniture for a new little place we bought on the beach.

I'd better not tell you the name of the store. But, how could we not go there when they advertise all the time on TV and every day's paper has a two page ad. Clearly, they spend a ton of money to get people into that store.

But not only that, the president of the store has been a friend and has been involved in our campus. I've been impressed with his personal Christian commitment and the way he runs the business with Christian principles.

Well, between the personal relationships and the advertising, we had to go there to at least check it out. And when we got there, the sales people were marvelous. I don't think there is one time we walked through the store that 15 people didn't ask us if we were being helped. They were very professional and clearly well trained. They really cared that we were getting just what we needed.

They had a wide selection of furniture to see, the prices were good, and their finance people made it easy for us to have 12 months the same as cash – which I will fully pay before any interest payments arrive. Even the delivery dispatcher turned all of his schedules upside down to get the furniture to the beach on the only day we could be there.

We felt like we had been treated right in every way. And, on the day the delivery truck showed up, we were ready for the end of a stress free furniture experience.

But those delivery guys got off the truck with an attitude that was looking for trouble. They slid the dresser down the side of the loading platform so they wouldn't have to actually pick it up. They didn't want to take with them the packing material but left it piled outside our door. Even though the condominium is so tiny our kids call it "CinderShella's closet," they didn't have to bang up every single wall we have.

And when we asked them to help move a couch down a hallway, they said they were not allowed to do that – unless we paid them extra.

Had the story ended there, I would have never set foot inside that store again.

It didn't matter that the company had spent a ton of money to get people like us in the door. It didn't matter that they had a good product and they had kept it affordable. It didn't matter that they were just nice people who did things right.

These three delivery guys had taken every bit of good done by all the others combined, and tossed it out the window.

And had I not been friends with the owner, I probably would have just let it go – but told anyone who wanted to listen never to shop there. But knowing that I appreciate it when someone tells me about a problem that we can fix, I told this story to my friend.

And not only did it get fixed with replacement for the damaged furniture but they kept working to assure that all was right and apologizing over and over including discounts and even a gift certificate for dinner. And from the way they responded, in addition to all the other good things they did, I would highly recommend Miskelli's.

Those delivery guys must have assumed they were not important in the scheme of selling furniture. They must have thought it was those who work in sales that make it or break it. Or maybe it is the people in the executive office that determine if the place goes well.

So they didn't fulfill the boundary that they had been given….they were just care-takers (although not even very good at that.) And in not fulfilling their boundary, the turned what could have been a great experience into one that was horrible.

Is the boundary that God has given to you important?

Whatever your responsibility – whether teaching the class or cleaning the classroom – what you do is vital. Because God would not have given you your boundaries if they didn't matter to him.

And God gave you that boundary to fulfill it, not just fill it.

One bad interaction with a student can ruin Belhaven College for an entire family, along with the school and the Church from where the student comes. It can undo thousands of dollars of advertising and fund

raising. It can keep dozens of students from ever considering Belhaven – and if they don't come, we can't minister to them.

That bad interaction could come from any one of us in this room. And in 98% of the cases, we would be totally justified in how we treated that student.

But the love of Christ has a higher standard than doing what is justified. So none of us can fulfill our boundaries through our own effort, but only in Christ can we reflect His love and grace.

If we truly want to know our boundaries, embrace them, and then fulfill them so that all we do glorifies Christ, we must have the power of His spirit working through us.

Each of us – whether this is your first time through an academic year or your 40th time around – needs to begin this new school year by bringing to the foot of the cross the boundaries that God has entrusted to us collectively, and the boundaries that he has entrusted to you personally.

Let's invite the presence of the Holy Spirit to surround us as we seek to fulfill those boundaries. And through Christ, let us bind together our efforts, in order to bring Glory to our Lord and Savior.

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I'd invite you to stand together and pray a prayer of commitment for this school year. Pastor Ligon Duncan is going to pray for us, and then Professor Chris Shelt will lead us in what has become the traditional conclusion of this evening, singing together, Bless Be the Tie that Binds.