Transcript
**Kickoff Message 2008**
Dr. Roger Parrott

***Become mature and measure up to the full stature of Christ.***
Ephesians 4:13

This year, we celebrate the 125th anniversary of our founding. Belhaven College for Young Ladies was established on Boyd Street in Jackson at the former residence of Colonel Jones S. Hamilton. The College took the name of the house, Belhaven in honor of Hamilton's ancestral home in Scotland, and we have in our archives, a tea set of the original china from the family home.

As you may know, the College burned twice in the first decade, and was then given to First Presbyterian Church.

Back then we were identified as a Christian College, and in those days that was all the identification we needed. In that era, to be known, as a Christian College made clear to our constituency that all the faculty and staff were Christians, who believed the bible, were committed to Jesus, and taught and lived accordingly. No other descriptor was necessary.

But 125 years later, to be called a Christian college is generic to some, confusing to others, and misunderstood by many. In a national survey asking Americans to name the best Christian colleges of the south, they ranked as first, Auburn - which of course is a land-grant institution.

Colleges that call themselves Christian run a wide spectrum from the ultra liberal to the ultra conservative.

Starting at the far end of this range are those who identify themselves as historically Christian, or Church related. These schools are officially connected to a denomination, keeping enough of their church identity to come in handy for raising money. But they usually don't let biblical truth get in the way of what they consider to be right.

And at the other end, are a group of Christian schools that identify themselves more by what they are against than what they believe.

For Belhaven, we sometimes call ourselves an evangelical school, but the media has distorted that word for many, and even among the schools of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities there is still wide diversity in that spectrum.

We have those, I call, “pray before class” colleges. They hire Christian faculty and staff, have Christian behavioral standards, and they do pray at the start of every class period. But they don’t teach much differently than what students would find at a secular university.

Moving up the spectrum, there are a large group of institutions that have a commitment to the integration of faith and learning, and so like seasoning a soup, they flavor their instruction in and out of the classroom with Christian thought, although they come up short in preparing students with a comprehensive Christ-centered worldview.

But then there are a small handful of schools that have gone back to the source, to create curriculum, teach, coach, support, and advise from a solid biblical framework. And I'm thankful that Belhaven is a leader among this group.

Now, of course, we have not drilled this down in every area as much as we could, and we must always be doing better. Because biblically based education operates in the same way as reading the Bible – you never finish it, you just start over, and go deeper each time around.

So to call ourselves a Christian college, and lump us in with schools that range from – (those I won't name) – at this liberal end of the spectrum to – (those I won't name) – at this legalistic end, is about as adequate as calling Walt Disney World an amusement park. It is one, but the Disney people don't want to be identified in that limited way nor be pooled together with others in that category.

Because we are so distinctive in what we do together for Christ on this campus, and because to say we are a Christian college is completely inadequate. Last spring we adopted a new identifier for the college to deal with this issue: "Our Standard is Christ," which you're now starting to see on our web site, in our materials, and advertisements.

It is a wonderful way to describe Belhaven College; because Christ is the only standard we want for our students and ourselves. But hear me very clearly on this: this identifier for us is not a marketing slogan – it is a commitment.

Yes, it may be used in marketing, but its purpose is to define Belhaven College, not making us memorable. Tag lines are cute for marketing, but what we are talking about with this identifier goes to the very core of our mission and to the heart of our personal relationship with Christ.

So for marketing alone we'll remind students: you "shouldn't leave home without us," because we are not "the no spin zone" we are "the real thing."

Our campus is the "happiest place on earth" because "we try harder."

- Our student life team "keeps going, and going, and going…"
- our coaches are "the ultimate driving machine,"
- our finance and fund raising offices are the "quicker-picker-upper"
- our physical plant team is "everywhere you want to be"
- and our faculty, well, "they're gr-r-r-r-eat…no, really, "these guys are good."

Oh, and as for worldview curriculum . . . "priceless!"

Our accelerated programs in Aspire and our branch campuses have "snap, crackle, and pop" helping our adult students to "think different." And those enrolled in our virtual campus, "can reach out and touch someone" because "we've come a long way, baby."

Prospective students will look at other colleges and ask, "where's the beef?" because they "taste great, but are less filling." So "don't get mad, get GLAD" and come to Belhaven College because, "a mind is a terrible thing to waste" and here, "we bring good things to life"

(*I think I've fallen and I can't get up*)

No, our new identifier is not about marketing memory, although you'll see it in some of our messages. It is laying out in unquestionable terms, who we are, whose we are, and the only reason why we do what we do.

If Christ wasn't our standard, I'd quit tomorrow and so would you, because all this would be a total waste of our energy.

But because Our Standard is Christ, there is nothing more important we could be doing. And in the world of higher education, that has eliminated Truth from teaching, holiness from living, and grace from relationships; we need to never waiver from our standard.

As an identifier, "Our Standard is Christ," marks us as an institution, because there is no other standard for us.

Any other standard we might consider is insignificant in comparison to Christ.

- Our Standard Is The Southern Association Of Colleges And Schools
- Our Standard Is Vanderbilt - Only More Christian
- Our Standard Is Being Better Than We Were Last Year
- Our Standard is Gaining in Prestige, Money, and Parking Spaces
- Our Standard is *US News and World Report* National Rankings
- Our Standard is Top Flight Scholarship, Admissions Competitiveness, Exceptional Facilities, World Class Programs, and Championship Athletics.

No, the only standard that matters is Christ.

For many years now, at Belhaven College, Christ has been our Standard, although we just haven't put it on the letterhead until this summer. But as the Church and the world become increasingly skewed by self-righteous pride, competitive greed, opportunistic goals, and best practices measurement, we need this standard on our letterhead so we can never hide from the blunt truth of what really matters.

Which raises the core question: what does it mean for Christ to be our standard? We must ask that question of ourselves, just as we want students to answer this central question of their life.

As with everything we start with the scripture. Read aloud with me in unison, Ephesians 4:10-13 printed on the front of your program in the New Living translation:

> The same one who came down is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens, so that his rule might fill the entire universe. He is the one who gave these gifts to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ, until we come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ.

This scripture instructs us, that if our standard is Christ, we are to measure up to His full stature – and to get there, we must do so both collectively and individually. Tonight, I'd like to mostly focus on the individual expectations, because that's where we immediately respond.

But first look with me very briefly at the four steps up to maturity in the *collective* process outlined in this passage, because our personal responsibility must be understood in light of our collective calling to measure up to the full stature of Christ.

1. We see that Christ rules over every aspect of the world and our lives – "<u>his rule might fill the entire universe</u>"

The reason so many never get the first step in measuring up to the full stature of Christ is their lack of realization that Christ is in everything. God is not just in the parts of our lives that seem significant, the times of questions or struggle, or the time of victory and break through. No, God rules over every aspect of the world and our lives.

There is nothing you do in your job every day that God does not care about. If you don't understand that foundational issue, you will never be able to take the next step toward measuring up to the full stature of Christ.

2. Second, notice the remarkable wording of the scripture in this next step. The scripture says, "*He is the one who gave these gifts to the church* and includes teachers in the same group with apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors.

To each of us on the payroll of Belhaven College, Christ has given unique gifts, all of which include teaching in some way. Every kickoff message for 13 years you've heard me say, whether your responsibility is in the classroom, on the athletic field, handling the administrative tasks, or caring for our physical plant – you are all teachers because students and others are always watching and learning from what you do.

So I don't care what your title is on this campus, for if you were not called to teach, God wouldn't have put you in the center of an environment where so many students could watch what you do.

Like a pastor who is called to equip the spiritual, emotional, and physical health of a congregation – this scripture bundles teachers in that same group. Thus, each of us is given gifts we can uniquely use to care for our students.

So with our understanding of God's preeminence, and our unique gifts as teachers in hand, the scripture then tells us, thirdly, that it is our "*responsibility to equip Gods people to do his work and build up the church.*"

Well, isn't that the mission of Belhaven College . . . "*responsibility to equip Gods people to do his work and build up the church*" sounds a lot like our mission statement: to prepare students academically and spiritually to serve Christ Jesus in their careers, in human relationships, and in the world of ideas.

- We equip God's people - academically and spiritually. Our calling is academic preparation within a Christ-centered worldview that allows them to see and serve the world from a spiritual perspective.

- And we build up the church – because building the church is about Christians being effective in their careers, in relationships, and engaging in the world of ideas so that the mind of Christ is heard in the public square.

I had not yet come to Belhaven when this wonderful mission statement was first crafted, and so I don't know the process, but it seems like we took it right out of this passage. And there could be no better way to frame our calling.

Because fourth, the reason we want to use our gifts to equip God's people is so we can *"come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son."*

See, this is where the trail ends if you're trying to become mature in Christ alone. You can't. God designed it that we needed each other, just like adventurers who climb the highest mountains of the world only get to the summit by working together.

Like those mountain climbers, you can get pretty far up the mountain on your own, but we never get to the top unless we work, struggle, trust, and forgive together. Christ and His Church are too multifaceted for anyone to "get it" alone, and so he designed us to come together and live up to His full stature only in unity.

I believe at Belhaven, we do mighty well not following the pattern of most of higher education— becoming a bunch of independent contractors working autonomously. But this scripture raises the stakes, reminding us we are limiting others and ourselves from living up to the full stature of Christ if we become walled off.

That is a sobering demand of our Christian faith that many are tempted to ignore, because controlling our own little world is hard enough without worrying about the person across the room from us tonight.

But because our chief aim is to be mature and full-grown in the Lord – measuring up to the full stature of Christ, we need each other if we are to serve our students in every aspect, as Christ would serve them.

So what does Christian maturity look like? Jesus summarized it, saying,

> *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

It is interesting to me that this was his answer to the most intellectual community of that day. So that there is no mistake, this is the calling for all of God's people and our brightest minds cannot substitute for love.

Quaker theologian, scholar, and Stanford professor Elton Trueblood has said, "I do not want to be primarily remembered as a Christian scholar, but rather as a loving person."

Loving God and others cannot be segmented out, and restricted only to our comfort zones, because it requires our emotions, our spirit, and our intellect - *love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind*. That is what a Belhaven education must be.

Christian maturity is growing in love for God and others because we understand the sovereign nature of God, and our calling to work in unity to serve the world. Christian immaturity, on the other hand is to love God and others because of what is in it for me.

Climbing these four steps to measure up to the full stature of Christ requires that we do it together. But we also have an individual responsibility if we are to develop a mature Christian faith.

It is a challenging question to ask how can we be like Jesus, because He was fully God on earth. Yes, He was, but He also was fully human. And focusing on those human traits, that were God filled, we have a clear picture of a mature faith.

I've been asking some of my theologian friends a question this summer that has seemed to surprise each one I've questioned. They have all said, I've never been asked that question before, but interestingly, with reflection, they all gave me the same answer.

Here is the question: what did Jesus do all day? We know what he did at times of significant teaching, or healing, or performing miracles; but what was a normal day like? That is what I've wanted to consider as I think about this theme verse for our year.

When I get up in the morning, I stumble out of bed, drink a diet coke, try to read the paper, and fix oatmeal. I go to work and stay there for varying amounts of time during the day focusing on meetings, phone calls, dictation, writing, and other stuff, before I come home and have dinner with the family, catch the evening news on my TiVo, read my bible, pay the bills, answer too many emails, and then go to bed. Only to do it all again the next day.

What did Jesus do when he got up in the morning….and all the rest of the day too?

Yes, each of us will have memorable moments during this year ahead. There will be athletic competitions that get our blood pressure up when the score is tight. There will be classroom experiences where a professor will go back to his or her office and say, "that's why I love to teach."

There will times this year we'll have administrative breakthroughs where we get our hands around a problem that seemed to be without a solution. There will moments of crisis in a student's life where a voice of direction will be life changing. There will be physical plant improvements that "wow" us; technological upgrades that make us all marvel, and recruiting successes that make us applaud.

This year will have many significant events woven into it. But most of what we do is just living our fairly ordinary life stuff – just as Jesus did. We'll be doing today, most of the things we did yesterday, and that we will do again tomorrow.

Those demands surely won't be worthy of a headline to send to integrated marketing to put on the web, and they won't even be significant enough to share around the lunchroom table. But, it will be the stuff that makes or breaks whether or not you and I live up to the full stature of Christ, because it will reflect Jesus in the ordinary moments of living.

With his disciples, Jesus ate meals, found places to stay, talked about the world around them, reflected on their families, told stories and laughed, met new people and found old friends, worked on the boats and nets when they fished, and during his time of popularity, dealt with the struggles of travel and with the challenges of crowd control. And most of his life is not recorded for us, so what did he do all day?

While my question has universally surprised my theologian friends, it has also been remarkable that I've received essentially the same answer from each one of them. And this is the answer:

> Jesus spent time building his inner strength, so that outwardly, he could reveal the nature of God through what he did.

Everything he did with others reflected the nature of God – from the work He did along side Joseph as a carpenter's apprentice to preaching the Sermon on the Mount, he always reflected the nature of God. From conversation over a meal, to struggling with fatigue from the business of a day, to the way He developed relationships – it was all about showing others who God is.

I want to suggest to you there are five arenas where we must focus if we are to live up to the full stature of Christ. And I want to briefly walk through them to trigger your thinking about how individually Our Standard is Christ.

Every outward action in the life of what Jesus did every day grew from an inward spiritual strength, and so, for Him and for us, we can't focus on the outcome, without linking it to the indwelling of God in our heart, soul, and mind.

<u>First, Jesus was Prayerful, so He could Live Genuinely</u>

So often in the life of Christ, we see him going off alone to pray. He was God, but being fully human, he needed to connect to His Father for strength to live genuinely. His grounding in prayer, which also was coupled with a deep study of the scripture (which He often quoted), was the foundation for his life. Because he was so well spiritually prepared, he could be genuine at all times.

My mother-in-law from Pennsylvania has a saying about someone who is genuine, "what you see is what you get." And that is how it was with Jesus. No matter how you sliced it, he was the same through and through.

To see the real nature of someone, you have to look at them under pressure, or at times when they are surprised and unable to prepare. Going to his torture and death on the cross, Jesus was able to forgive. When awakened from a nap in a boat, he could calm a storm.

His life was so completely genuine that there were never times He was anything different than what everyone assumed He was.

Can we say the same thing? Can we live genuinely, so that in our times of highest stress or being caught off guard, we reflect the nature of God?

Many people sign their letters "sincerely" which means genuine. That is a serious way to frame your signature, because the word sincere has it's roots in Roman times when marble cutters began to hide the flaws in the stone they sold by filling in the cracks with wax. And until the weather changed, you couldn't tell the cracks were there.

And so the Roman government made marble cutters guarantee their stone was not filled with wax by marking it as "sincere." The law didn't require stonecutters to declare their stone was genuine, but the price of saying it was genuine if it was not, was execution.

You and I don't have to say we are genuine, but the price of saying we are, if we are not, is very high.

Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, used to pray regularly, "Lord, take me home before I do anything that would dishonor you, or embarrass my wife."

Or expressing it even more pointedly "Is there anything in your life tonight that if it became public, would embarrass Belhaven College, and discredit the name of Jesus?" That is a hard, but critical question, we need to be asking.

If your answer is not what it ought to be, then it is not a time to just try harder only to fail again, but a time to become more prayerful – and learning to pray the scripture is a wonderful model that Jesus taught us.

<u>Secondly, Jesus was Compassionate, so he could Love Unconditionally</u>

I've come to believe that for any student who is failing or unmotivated, tough to handle or abrasive, obstinate and hard to mold – if we could fully see the challenges and pain of their life, we would deal with them with a level of compassion that would trigger unconditional love like they have never experienced.

I've come to believe that if you and I could compassionately see the full life of any co-worker with whom we have conflict, or struggle, or with whom we just can't seem to connect well, as unconditional love would encircle the tensions we had together.

But we don't see the full picture of people – we just see their veneer, not the real challenges of the person within. If we did, we'd be overcome with compassion, and out of that, we would reveal the nature of God by loving them unconditionally.

This is why Jesus could be so compassionate on those that others ignored. We see this when He meets the woman at the Samaritan well. The scripture says,

> "Go and get your husband," Jesus told her. "I don't have a husband," the woman replied. Jesus said, "You're right! You don't have a husband – for you have had five husbands, and you aren't even married to the man you're living with now."

We don't have that supernatural power to easily see behind the public persona of others. But if we could, we would see them very differently than what we assume about them.

A grocery store checkout clerk wrote a letter to the editor of her local newspaper to complain that she had seen people buy "luxury" food items—like birthday cakes and bags of shrimp—with their food stamps. The writer went on to say that she thought all those people on welfare who treated themselves to such non-necessities were "lazy and wasteful."

Now, she had an important point, because the food stamp program was established to assure that families could afford essential foods.

But a few weeks later two letters also showed up in the letter to the editor page. One woman wrote:

> I didn't buy a cake, but I did buy a big bag of shrimp with food stamps. So what? My husband had been working at a plant for fifteen years when it shut down. The shrimp casserole I made was for our wedding anniversary dinner and lasted three days. Perhaps the grocery clerk who criticized that woman would have a different view of life after walking a mile in my shoes.

Another woman wrote:

> I'm the one who bought the $17 cake and paid for it with food stamps. I thought the checkout woman in the store would burn a hole through me with her eyes. What she didn't know is the cake was for my little girl's birthday. It will be her last. She has bone cancer and will probably be gone within six to eight months.

We do not know what is the real story behind the students we serve – or that of each other. Jesus does, and that is why he has such compassion on us, and why we need to develop Christ-like compassion in our lives, if we are also to reveal God's nature by loving unconditionally.

Third, Jesus was Humble, so he could Mentor Deeply

Jesus was the most humble person to ever walk this earth. He was God, in the body of a human, and he could have done most anything he wanted to do – he had the power to make anything happen. But he limited himself to doing only what his Heavenly Father asked him to do.

And so through his humility, he was able to spend ordinary days with his disciples, and reveal the nature of God to them through a deep mentoring relationship.

Have you ever seen a Christian who is prideful, be a mentor? I haven't either.
The marvelous theologian J. I. Packer writes, "It is impossible at the same time to give the impression both that I am a great Christian and that Jesus Christ is a great Master."

In this room, there is so much wisdom to be poured into the lives of our students. Because of you they can see the world through the eyes of Christ, love with the compassion of Jesus, and serve with boldness to be used of God. But what we hold in our hands will only be opened up to them, as we are genuinely humble and give up ourselves, in order to lift up Christ.

Mentoring is not about having answers for those disciples who come to sit at your feet, for the Christian life is not adopting a set of simplistic patterns. No, genuine mentoring is listening more than lecturing, praying more than preaching, and caring more than curing. It is trusting that God will be lifted up, instead of ourselves as we invest in our students and coworkers.

Mentoring is never a straight line of success. It demands persistence, risk, and endless patience. But it is the most significant way we can reveal the nature of God to others, and pour into them all the blessings that God has given to us.

I once knew a remarkable College president who was nearing retirement after a stellar career. Even though he was physically suffering from the wear of the years, he came to the job every day with a commitment to release the gifts of the people around him.

He took under his wing a 26 year-old fresh Ph.D. who had not been tested or seasoned. The president put this associate into situations that sometimes worked out great; and other times, he had to clean up the mess of his young protégée. He entrusted him with far more responsibility than anyone should have at that age, and the president never backed up when he was criticized for doing so.

Nearly daily, he was growing and pruning the one he may have seen as a younger version of himself. He would teach from the moments of drama, provide assurance in the ongoing process of growth, and prune when the door was shut, so corrections could be made in private rather than with embarrassment. And I don't think he ever stopped praying for the one he was mentoring.

I've often thought how much easier it would have been for that president to go out and hire a top-quality administrator who had already been through the fires and could carry the responsibility with ease and grace during the final years of his presidency. But I'm sure glad he didn't, or I never would have had the chance to grow and be pruned for much more to come since those years with my mentor.

Each one of us should be a mentor on this campus. If you can't find someone to mentor here, you're not looking very hard, which brings us to the next important characteristic of how Jesus revealed God to others.

<u>Fourth, Jesus was Confident, so he could Assure Availability</u>

When you are so sure your calling is from God, you can live in confidence, because nothing can keep you from being successful. Confidence is not about your personality type, developing an aggressive style, or putting on your game face to go out there. Being confident, comes from that deep assurance that this is the exact place where God wants you to be at this exact time, doing this exact thing.

The reason we are timid in our ministry is not because our nature doesn't lend itself to confidence. We are timid when we are unsure of our calling. Jesus was so grounded in His purpose and calling, that he could be confident facing an attack, preaching before thousands, or mentoring one Samaritan woman when he stopped for a drink.

The confidence of Christ wasn't lived out in him by setting out with a master plan to accomplish predetermined objectives that intimidated everyone else. Instead, we see all his ministry moments coming to him. He had a remarkable way of expressing his confidence by assuring availability.

He was available when the sick came…. or the critics….. or the intellectuals….. or the rich….. or the poor… or the church leaders….. or the worst sinners. His confidence assured his availability.

I think on a campus, we can become tempted to be very busy doing things, and allow those goals to keep us from being available for genuine ministry. If we are not confident in our calling, we can put up walls of structure, and programs, and policies, and demands, and hurriedness to assure others can't get to us. And when we do, we miss the best opportunities to reveal the nature of God to others.

If you study the daily life of Jesus, you see that most of the people he reached came to him as interruptions. He was headed one direction, and someone came to him and pulled him another direction. And his confidence was the trigger to know that interruptions were not to be dismissed, but they would be his most memorable moments of ministry.

You and I need to be so sure of our calling to this place and time that we can confidently venture into whatever God brings into our path and be thankful for the interruptions that will be our times of most significance.

If you're not being interrupted often – very often – you're not doing it right, and you need to rediscover your calling, and reach out to our students and each other with confidence because Our Standard is Christ.

<u>Lastly, Jesus was Focused, so he could Work Purposefully</u>

Jesus lived in this world just as we do, but his focus was toward another place, not this one. He had a perspective that allowed him to understand what the new heaven and new earth would be, and so his focus was eternal, not earthly.

He had been there, and would return there, so he had the assurance of something that takes lots more trust on our part to grasp. Jesus worked on this earth completely focused toward heaven, because he knew it was as genuine as the ground he walked in Galilee.

- He prayed to his father, like we would call a loved one talking about coming home soon from a long trip.

- To Him, heaven and earth were so linked there was no question about its reality.

- For Jesus the unseen spiritual world was as absolutely assured as was the human visible world.

Because of that, Jesus worked purposefully. He prayed, taught, mentored, and loved, in ways that connected eternal life with earthly life. He revealed the nature of God that allowed others to see past what is now, and worked purposefully in connection to the world to come.

England's most famous pastor, and devotional writer, Charles Spurgeon says, "When you speak of heaven, let your face light up. When you speak of hell — well, then your everyday face will do."

Our picture of Jesus is of a strong and tall man in his early 30s of middle-eastern complexion, wearing fairly home made clothes, sandals, and probably a scarf to wipe away the sweat and dirt from travel. He ate simple food, slept in borrowed places, had loyal friends, and knew how to work with his hands in carpentry and fishing, while also teaching with a depth like no one had ever heard.

And that is a fairly accurate picture if our focus is limited to this world. But if we see beyond that, to link between this world and eternity to come, here is the accurate picture of Jesus that God allowed John to see, and is recorded for us in Revelation:

> I saw seven gold lamp stands. And standing in the middle of the lamp stands was the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were bright like flames of fire.
>
> His feet were as bright as bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was as bright as the sun in all its brilliance.
>
> When I saw him, I fell at his feet as dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one who died. Look, I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave.

This is the Christ who is our Standard. Not the Jesus we picture as a man 2000 years ago, but Jesus, who is God. This same Jesus handpicked you and me, to minister to the students of Belhaven College in the 125th year of our work on this campus.

The reality of the interlinking between heaven and earth has always been a struggle for Christians through the ages.

C.S. Lewis said, “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next … Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither.”

I often wish we could find ways to be reminded more often of the direct link between our daily work and the eternal significance of Belhaven College. And this summer, the bells went off, and the image hit me, which I want to leave with you in closing tonight.

Remember that great Christmas classic movie, its A Wonderful Life? The Christian director, Frank Capra, tried to give a feel for the link between heaven and earth. In that final seen, we see George, with poor hearing from his accident as a child, with his family around the Christmas tree.

But George is the only one who hears the bell ring on the top of the tree, because his angel had told him,

heaven was real, and that every time a bell rings on earth, an angel is getting their wings in heaven.

Well, this summer I was over in the traditional admission department. That is the most fun group on campus . . . they energize me. They were showing me all the plans they had for helping reach out to these prospective student families, the long list of inquiries that continued to grow, and the bulletin board where they post photographs of students who have applied.

And then I heard a bell ring. I asked what it was, and they said, "Oh, one of the counselors must have gotten an application." And they went on to tell me that they all have bells on their desk. And if they get an application they ring it…. if they get a deposit they ring it… if they get a new inquiry they ring it… if they have a breakthrough with a family who wants a Christ-centered education at Belhaven they ring it…. when they put the picture of a student on the board who is coming this fall, they ring it….
And every time a bell rings in their wing of Fitzhugh Hall, they all come out of their offices to see what happened and celebrate what God is about to do in that student's life.

They made me overjoyed at how they had grasped the eternal significance of what we are doing here. Admissions is not about building an enrollment so this will be a vibrant campus, but it is about transforming lives – and every student we reach truly does ring a bell in heaven.

Bells have always been connected to a heavenly message, which is why churches are the only buildings that regularly have bells built into their architecture. And as the 19th Century hymn reminds us, "Ring the bells of heaven, there is joy today, for the wander now is reconciled."

Every day, bells ring in heaven; because of what each of you do in revealing the nature of God to our students. If you listen, you will hear those bells all across the campus of Belhaven College throughout the school year.

A bell rings . . .

- With each adult who gets the courage to finish a degree

- With every classroom discussion that drills down the hard questions of life
- With every hallway conversation that pushes a student further
- With every response of patience when a student is frustrated
- With every building that is cleaned well, because we love our students, even when they forget to show appreciation.
- With every intervention when a student is on the verge of dropping out.
- With every interruption.
- With every student whose life is forever changed because you assured your availability . . .

A bell rings in heaven.

God's calling for you at Belhaven College is to make an eternal difference for each student, and subsequently their family, and everyone they will touch in their lives ahead – because each ringing of a bell continues to reverberate far beyond what we will ever hear.

- This year we must be people of prayer so that we can live genuinely.

- Each of us needs to be filled with the compassion Christ has for us, so we can love others unconditionally.

- Might we become less, so that Christ is more, and we can mentor deeply.

- And from the longest-term faculty member to the newest hourly employee, might we be so confident in our calling that we will assure availability.

- Then if our focus is on eternity to come, we can work purposefully to serve our students.

Because . . . Our Standard is Christ.

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