Service of Dedication Message

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T R AN S C R I P T

August 17, 2011

They will be called great trees of righteousness, planted by the Lord for his glory.

Isaiah 61:3

One would think that at a University you could find out anything on any topic, with just a phone call, or a walk across campus. But, I've been searching for one piece of information that seems impossible to find.

I'm trying to find the application form to become an honorary Southerner. Now, I know if you're not born here, you can't be officially in, and I was born in Michigan.

Through the years MaryLou and I have grown to love Mississippi so much that we want to apply to become honorary Southerners. But, like all the best things in the South, this too, is humbly hidden, unless you know where to look.

When I first came to Belhaven, our director of PR at the time told me, "everyone will ask you two questions: who is your daddy, and what county are you from."

Well, sure enough, in one form or another, those were the introductory questions I was asked by many.

I remember being at a Presbytery meeting in those first months, and an elderly gentleman asked to meet me to assure I would be suitable as president. He wasn't able to get across the sanctuary using his walker, so they took me over to where he was – and wanting to calm his fears, I began to share my credentials so that he would be comfortable that Belhaven's board hadn't made a mistake.

I was quickly reciting my list of academic degrees and experience, when he abruptly interrupted and said, "all I want to know is who's your daddy, and what county are you from." I said, "my father and grandfather were both Christian College presidents, and my other grandfather was from Tupelo."

After a long pause, while he looked me up and down, he said, "you'll do." And turned his walker and shuffled away.

For 16 years I've been telling about my grandfather's roots in Tupelo to justify my Southern heritage as president of Belhaven. But this spring, when my mother died, I had to have the name of her grandparents for the official records, and when I went looking, I found my Southern roots were deeper than I ever imagined.

One grandfather was born in Tupelo and my grandmother had deep roots in Louisiana. My other grandparents both came from Tennessee, but planted a church in Jasper, Alabama, and founded a school, which is now the public school system for that town.

Searching even further back, I found even deeper Southern roots. John Etheredge, the grandfather of my grandmother, joined the confederate army as a private at the age of 30. They owned a small farm that raised strawberries, so his wife Catherine made buttons that looked like strawberries to sew onto his uniform.

Along with his three younger brothers, the four of them joined the Georgia 51st in 1862 and fought at Chancellorsville and at Gettysburg. But, John was the only one to come home from the war.

Searching even further back, his grandfather, John Dooly, lived outside Augusta, Georgia on a plantation called Egypt, where he farmed and was the county Sherriff.

He was a feisty and combative revolutionary and after American independence had been declared, he became a Colonel in the Army defending the new state of Georgia from the Red Coats.

He gained fame as a fearless leader in one of the most significant battles of the South. But a year later, when his army of 400 was taken captive, his reputation plummeted.

Because of a clerical error the British released him. But when Torie members heard he was home again, they plotted revenge because of how he treated them while serving as the state attorney – jailing many of his neighbors who were sympathetic to the British, and having two of them executed for conspiring with the enemy.

One night, a small group of men came into their home and murdered him as his wife clung to their 3 year-old girl and the two younger boys hid. The killers were all caught and hanged.

His son, who would become an important judge in Georgia, convinced the legislature to name a county for his father, and Dooly County, just south of Macon, was named for him 41 years after his death.

Now, looking back at least eight generations through my family history, we have been deeply invested in the South. So, I don't you think it would be appropriate that I could apply to be an honorary Southerner?

After all, isn't the growth of the branches of a tree determined by the depth of its roots?

In my roots are educators and pastors, risk takers and trend breakers, entrepreneurs and builders – and some spiffy dressers too – like my new cuff links?

There were Methodist, Baptists, and Presbyterians – some who didn't always do the right thing, and others who appeared to be shining Christian examples.

But all seemed to work hard to be loyal to the Church and their calling, and although far from perfect, most never wandered from their foundation of faith.

They cared deeply about family, because there is not a single divorce in the whole group. They never baulked at a challenge, in fact, fought hardest when it seemed impossible.

At times they were stubborn to the point of loneliness on principle, and at other times pushing others out front to achieve the greater good. They sometimes failed, they sometimes got beat, but all seemed to get back up with determination to do better the next time.

Most were just regular good folks and not remembered past their time, although a few stood out for their willingness to take leadership. They were mostly people who lived a long time and dug in deeply where they were planted.

And they were all Southerners.

Like a great Southern live oak tree, in a family tree, the branches grow from the roots.

And if, like me, you sign up to Ancestry.com to discover your history, you'll probably also find that who you are today can be traced to the roots of your family tree as well.

The strongest trees have roots that grow as deeply as the tree grows tall. But when those roots have been damaged, the whole tree suffers, not just the damaged root. Or if the roots never get the chance to gain a solid footing, the tree lives a life in peril with every nearing storm.

A host of factors, from soil quality, to temperature, to moisture, to protection, will all determine which trees take root and grow resilient and which trees barely hang on to survive.

In generations past, roots were most often put down in close-knit community circles, in which they took hold through consistent accountability, obligations, and expectations.

But today's emerging generation is attempting to plant their roots amidst the noise of media static, the stretched nature of the family, and the clash of messages that confuse rather than clarify.

And sadly, higher education, which should be providing the most fertile ground for roots to have a growth spurt, has mostly betrayed the trust that students and families have placed in universities.

How should it be?

I call on all faculty, as a thinking body, to recognize the tremendous validity and power of the teachings of Christ in our life-and-death struggle against the forces of selfish materialism.

That is not my call – it's from the 1937 inaugural address of Charles Seymour, the new President of Yale University.

That is what higher education used to be.

Instead, today on American campuses:

> Only 40% of students graduate in four years with the average being six years.
>
> Fifty years ago students spent 24 hours studying per week and today they spend just 8 hours.
>
> Senior professors in Ivy League universities now take sabbaticals every third year.
>
> It costs $20,405 to support each golf team member at Duke and the average salary for an SEC softball coach is $250,000, and a salary equivalent to about 70 faculty members to pay some head football coaches.
>
> Only 31% of college seniors can understand a newspaper editorial, but 44% of college students are classified as binge drinkers.
>
> 10% of students report they are "totally engaged" in their education while up to 50% say they are "totally disengaged."
>
> Most importantly, the academy has systematically cut all biblical Truth from scholarship, curriculum, teaching and campus life values. And instead, in most classrooms faith has become ridiculed at best and trivialized at worst.

Then we wonder why higher education is not producing graduates who can think unselfishly and act with integrity.

This spring I spoke for the commencement of my cousin's husband who retired as president of Southern Wesleyan University – a small evangelical school next door to Clemson. The night before the event, we went to dinner and they drove me through the Clemson campus to the gate of their famous football stadium, called Death Valley.

This is a school that only takes 60% of the students who apply, with a third of their freshmen class having a 30 or above on the ACT, with an average High School grade point of 3.9.

As we stared out into the darkness of that empty stadium my cousin said, "you know, the amazing thing about Clemson, with their high academics and all their money, is that they will have more freshmen drop out this fall than we have students in our entire Christian school.

Higher education is not failing because students can't do the academic work. Rather, the trees can't grow because the soil has become too poisoned for roots to be nurtured.

And, I'm always haunted by the fact that research finds 52% of high school evangelical students who attend a secular university will no longer identify themselves as born-again or will have attended any religious service in the prior twelve months at the end of their college career.

Because higher education isn't the way it ought to be, what we do at Belhaven becomes even more vital for every family who is sending their student here this fall, and for every adult and graduate student who is making the sacrifice to assure they get an education that is grounded in biblical Truth.

Christ came so that students could break free from what today's higher education is offering as the answer, and instead, they could become trees of righteousness planted for God's glory.

Our theme verse for our year comes from what's called the first text of Jesus. This is the scripture Jesus reads in the temple the first time he preached in his hometown – and it's interesting he went back to his roots to talk about planting and read this passage from Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon you, for the LORD has anointed you to ring good news to the poor.
>
> He has sent you to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed.
>
> He has sent you to tell those who mourn that the time of the LORD's favor has come, and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies.
>
> To all who mourn, he will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, a festive praise instead of despair.

They will be called great trees of righteousness, planted by the Lord for his glory.

Then Luke tells us, "He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!" (4:16-21)"

This passage from Isaiah that includes our verse of the year was a prophesy of the mission statement of Jesus. And if this encapsulates his desires, then we, who are his children, must be equally driven by this same purpose.

Here we are given clear instructions for how to help plant trees that will put down deep roots and grow to glorify God.

Tonight I want to share with you, five characteristics of our students - who are trees being planted by the Lord – and then three responsibilities we have to help them grow.

1. The Lord calls our students great before they are grown.

We are so fortunate to have some great old majestic trees on our campus. In fact, I'm sure in some conversation with a guest or friend; you've looked at a tree and said, "isn't that a great tree."

I know the art department has drawn many and the creative writing department has written about some.

But I doubt that any of us have looked at the new ones we planted in the last year, stopped to admire them, and remarked to someone, "that one over there, it's just 3 feet high, but it's such a great tree."

It's not a great tree in our eyes . . . but it will be.

Instead, through the lens of heaven, God can see the potential in every tree – in every student – and he says they are great . . . even when we don't yet see it.

Phillip Yancy has written, "Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are."

And then Yancy goes on to ask, "How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible's astounding words about God's love for me, if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?"

In higher education we are in the business of evaluating our students, but your judgment about a student is not the measure of their worth. God has already declared they are great, and we should treat them accordingly.

Notice that God doesn't call them perfect, he calls them great.

He knows what successes they will have, but he also knows they will sin.

He knows the good they will do for others in his name, but he knows they will hurt others at times.

He knows they will stumble and have to get back up, and maybe do it again and again.

He knows they will have tough times when it feels like heaven is silent, and times when they are rejoicing night and day in the presence of God's goodness.

He knows they will become people of sacrifice and giving, who also can be selfish at times.

He knows they will mean well, even when they don't always do well.

He forgives the sin, forgets the past and keeps wiping the slate clean, so that he can call them great. And he wants us to see them through his eyes.

2. God has the patience to give our students time to grow.

Nearly a century ago, a patient leader was strolling through the gardens of his fortified French compound in Casablanca one morning when he asked his gardener to plant an exotic tree. The gardener objected, explaining that the tree was slow growing and would not reach maturity for 100 years. "In that case" replied the leader, "there is no time to lose; plant it this afternoon!"

President Kennedy made famous the tree-planting story by repeating it on numerous occasions. But recognizing that tree planting leader in 1924, *Time Magazine* named General Lyautey "the most brilliant of France's colonial administrators" for his vision of establishing French rule without diluting the unique culture of the Moroccan people his army had conquered.

He was a leader who was willing to wait for genuine results. The General never sought the praise generated by immediate success, seeking instead solutions that would make a lasting difference.

And despite the criticism of his peers, he was proven right, as Morocco is today the only long-term NATO friendly country in Africa.

We could all use more patience toward the trees that are in our care – and probably toward each other as well, as we're all still growing.

If God is calling seedling trees great, that means he has the patience to wait for them to grow, and we should too. We need to regularly pray for the insight to see our students through the eyes of God rather than the limited prism of our immediate expectations.

3. Most of our students will grow unseen in a forest.

Most trees live their life undistinguished. Oh, they are everything in the world, to the other trees around them, and the birds and animals that live in their shelter. But to most of the world, they won't seem to matter – but they do.

Without them, we would all be dead in months, if not weeks.

Each acre of trees produces enough oxygen for 18 people every day.

Every year, that same acre of trees absorbs the carbon dioxide of a car driven 26,000 miles.

The net cooling effect of a young healthy tree is equivalent to ten room-size air conditioners running non-stop.

So, all trees are important.

But universities like to feature landmark trees . . . it's even interesting how many campuses name them – like Auburn's 130 year-old Toomer Oakes that were poisoned in February by a rival fan.

Like their trees, universities love standout students. The major league player, business entrepreneur, or politician is often lifted up as the examples of success. We like to brag on those trees that dominate the landscape.

But God plants most trees in forests– hidden away from distinction, but where they can do the most good for the most people. The elementary school teacher, 8-5 business worker, the small church pastor – all puts oxygen into the air that allows us all to breath.

If we want to use God's standard, success in higher education should not be measured by a short-listing of notable alumni. Instead, we need to be lifting up God's planting of a forest that enriches life for all.

But whether one of our graduates becomes a Giant Sequoia as tall as the Statue of Liberty or is hidden in rain forest totally unnoticed, every tree is created to grow where God plants it – and all are called great.

This scripture is often translated to name the trees "Great Oaks" which is an understandable image because that is probably the type tree we think of when we imagine a great tree.

But, I went to my best source for biblical translation, Dan Fredericks, who was one of the translators for the New Living Bible, and he told me the most literal translation does not detail what type tree God calls great. Instead, the scripture says all of them are great – even when they may look very different.

There are lots of types of trees – botanist estimate there are about 100,000 species of trees.

> signature trees like the live oaks in Gillespie commons
>
> broadly spreading Banyon trees in Africa
>
> aspen trees that grow by multiplying rather than height
>
> fruit trees ... flowering trees ... evergreen trees ... and leafy trees that give off beautiful colors when they change in the fall.
>
> and some of the most overlooked trees are trees in ditches and along slopes that hold soil in place.

But the scripture reminds us, that although very different, all are planted for his glory. Every type of tree he plants has a purpose … and he calls all of them great trees of righteousness.

Righteousness is us following the law without failing: never a miss step, never a blind spot, never an impure action or selfish motive.

But because the standard of righteousness is perfection, none of us will ever achieve it – yet, we, and our students, can be called great trees of righteousness by God.

We cannot earn a label of righteousness by growing into it; we cannot grit our teeth and achieve it by a list of good works; and we can't wrestle with God over loopholes so that we can justify being called righteous.

Only through the gift of salvation can we be forgiven and through his purifying sanctifying grace can live in relationship with Jesus – the only one to ever lead a sinless life.

This is the core of our relationship with Christ – that we are justified by grace alone – and only with faith to accept the gift of his grace can we be called great trees of righteousness.

As Martin Luther explained it:

> Sin is not canceled by lawful living, for no person is able to live up to the Law. The Law reveals guilt, fills the conscience with terror, and drives men to despair.

Much less, is sin taken away by man-invented endeavors. The fact is, the more a person seeks credit for himself by his own efforts, the deeper he goes into debt.

Nothing can take away sin except the grace of God.

Our students, and you and I, will be called great trees of righteousness not by our efforts, but only through grace offered to us in Christ.

4. All our students are extremely vulnerable when first planted.

Yes, God can make a tree grow anywhere. But the lone Cyprus of Monterey is famous because it is the only one that seems to grow out of a rock. If not planted in rich soil, and properly nourished and protected, most seedlings won't take root.

I want you to take a field trip with me to understand our responsibility to care for students at this important stage of life:

Tomorrow, drive all the way down Peachtree Street, and you'll see what happens to trees when purposeful care is given to a young tree rather than simply allowing them to struggle to make it with minimal support.

When we widened the sidewalk for our new walking trail last year, we had to take out some trees on Peachtree Street in order to make room. But, keeping our commitment to plant more trees than we cut down, we came back this spring and planted some new crape myrtles.

Next time you drive by them, take note how each is planted carefully with the right shape of the topsoil to hold water for maximum nourishment from the rain, each is supported with stakes to assure it will not bend as it is taking root.

And most importantly, our trees were well protected and carefully tended in a protected environment before they were put into the harsh reality of the open world.

And because I know how James Massey and his crew planted them, each was put in the ground with the right mixture of nutrients to be confident they would thrive.

Now, keep going down the Street past the public school at the other end of Peachtree. They also planted new trees.

They are fenced off with a little bit of chicken wire and they have no stakes of support. Because I happen to be driving by on the day they planted them, I know that all that was done for them was to dig a hole and push them into the ground.

They weren't protected in a nursery for long before they were planted. They were just small seedlings to begin with, so hardly had a chance. The majority of them have already died, and it is unlikely any will flourish.

If you'd like, you can look beyond all the research on pedagogy, all the student development theories, and the mentoring and coaching guidebooks. Just drive by those two sets of young trees every morning, and you'll know how to carry out your responsibility as a gardener for God's plantings.

5. When mature our students will withstand almost anything.

After Hurricane Katrina hit six years ago this month, I came to campus early that morning and had to park down the street because so many fallen trees blocked the way. Like many of you, I made my way here, and it looked like a mess of limbs everywhere.

But while we were focused on the trees that couldn't withstand the storm, we didn't notice that most of our trees did stand up to the 100 mph wind gusts. They also make it through long hot summers, winters, ice storms, and long periods with too much rain or too little.

If a tree is first given the chance to grown down so it can grow up, then when the storms of life come, it is can weather most anything.

That doesn't mean there will not be tough seasons for growing. Some periods where the tree grows faster than others, and sometimes limbs will be broken off that put it in jeopardy of surviving. But when the roots are put down deeply, it will nearly always come through those times.

As you know, the story of every tree can be seen in the rings of its trunk. They tell a history of good times and tough times. They show the years when all was working right, and years when there was no growth. And we can even see the attacks that jeopardized the tree's future.

Most importantly, we see the evidence that life is rarely a straight line of success.

There are times in life for all of us when we are searching for stability and life is complex, difficult, but hard to understand. During those times we don't have the answers, but we hardly know the questions to ask or how to pray.

But we can weather those storms because we know the loving, protecting, and gracious God planted us for his Glory. And when roots are put down deep, we can all withstand the toughest storms of life.

God has a purpose for every tree he plants. And we, who are charged with putting hands, voice, and feet to his work of planning, must understand that all our students – traditional age,

adult, graduate, online – every one of those students can become a great tree of righteousness, planted for his glory.

What a precious opportunity the Lord gives us. Not to just sit under the shade of majestic trees and marvel at his handiwork, but to be his gardeners to help plant those seedlings during the most important phase of their lives.

But the Lord never gives us a calling without giving us guidance to carry it out. So the scripture goes on to outline our responsibilities.

In the name of the Lord we are to:

bring good news to the poor,

comfort the broken-hearted,

proclaim that captives will be released.

First, we are to bring Good News to the poor.

Now, I'm sure you read this and want to stop right there to say our students are not poor. Well many may feel poor, but when compared to the rest of the world, the poorest of our students are extremely wealthy – even those with the biggest load of loans.

One of our responsibilities as Christian educators is to help them understand the Church's obligation to the financially poor. We must continue to do that because a more comfortable interpretation of this scripture is not an excuse to pass off to government agencies the responsibility of the Church in caring for the poor.

I think it's encouraging to see how many of our students have a heart for the poor and have prepared themselves to serve the least among us economically.

But in light of our daily calling as faculty and staff of Belhaven University, let me focus us to the broader meaning of poor – because Jesus clearly didn't come only for the those in our world who are financially struggling.

Through Christ, we have the joy to bring Good News to those who are caught in a poverty of hope, a poverty of relationships, and a poverty of spirit – all just as crippling as economic poverty – but with ramifications that reach into eternity.

We will have those students on our campuses next week, and they need the Good News that the grace of Jesus can free them from their poverty.

In his book "*Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*" researcher Dr. Chap Heart of Fuller Seminary contends that adolescence today is fundamentally different from what it was 30 years ago. He is asking the Church to help turn the tide of, what he calls "Systematic Abandonment."

Researchers more often focus on teenagers for their studies because they are an easily defined group. But those among us who work with our adult students know there is just as much poverty among them as there in the poverty of abandonment among teenagers.

And this year, Jesus will give us multiple opportunities to bring Good News to the poor if we will reach out to them.

Second, we are to comfort the brokenhearted

This year's announcers of the Masters golf tournament repeatedly used the word broken-hearted to describe the loss by 21 year-old Rory Mcllroy.

After leading the tournament for three rounds and heading into the final round with a four stroke lead, he fell apart – ending up tied for 15th, 10 strokes behind the leaders.

A reporter asked Rory a few days later what it was like to cope with such a heart breaking loss. With that Irish smile he said, "if this is as bad as life gets, then it's pretty good."

And the golf world was stunned when the young player from Northern Ireland, came back to win the US Open in a runaway victory just a few weeks later.

Broken-heartedness is not losing the Masters – that is disappointing or discouraging – as is, not getting the starting position on our football team, the lead role in the play, or the extra credit question on the test.

For our students those times can generate very real hurt – after all, this is the generation that was raised with everyone getting both a pizza and trophy after the soccer game – win or lose.

But this scripture is talking about something much more serious.

Broken-heartedness is your point of greatest need. It is a severely damaged root that might be from a relationship that has been shattered, the overwhelming uncontrollability of circumstance, or a stupid failure that seems impossible to undo.

Broken-heartedness is a deep-seated hurt that guides and drives everything else in life.

We have students arriving this week who come broken-hearted, although they will come with their smiles, their bluster, or their timidity that hides it.

And we have classrooms full of adult students who are seeking a last chance at finding a way free from a broken-heartedness that has pulled the joy of life out of them.

God calls Belhaven University to comfort the broken-hearted. We're not told to scold them for getting into the mess, or map out a plan for getting out of it, or recite accounts of how we did it better.

Instead, the Lord wants us to give them what they need most – *comfort* – or you can substitute the word "grace," for that's what comfort is.

As Phil Yancy says, "Grace is like water . . . it flows to the lowest point."

They need to know that God loves them despite it all; God's grace is limitless; and God's love is not earned.

As Philip Yancy crystallized so succinctly in his wonderful book, "*What's So Amazing About Grace*," "We need to let it soak in that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more…and nothing we can do to make God love us less."

Grace is the only comfort we can offer that can heal the brokenhearted.

Third, we are to proclaim captives will be released and prisoners freed.

In today's world, insecurity is the prison that holds many people just as captive as if they were in a physical prison. Insecurities limit the lives of our students, and maybe some of us as well. Insecurity keeps people from enjoying the freedom of God's grace.

When I was in Cape Town, South Africa for the Lausanne Congress, last fall I took a boat 22 miles off shore to the famous prison – Robben Island. Political prisoners from all across Africa were held there including its most famous convict, Nelson Mandela, who would become president of South Africa after 27 years in captivity.

The tour was lead by a former prisoner of the island who told of the meager food rations, which were downgraded even further depending on the darkness of your skin, showed us how hard a wool mat on a concrete floor can feel, and took us to the stark white salt pits where years of work nearly blinded Mr. Mandela and his fellow prisoners.

On that island, I sat for a long time on a rock looking back across the turbulent ocean at Table Mountain, that frames Cape Town, the most thriving city in Africa.

And I wondered what it would have been like for those prisoners to see freedom so close – but know how impossible it was to reach.

Rather than 22 miles of dangerous sea being the source of hopelessness for prisoners of Robbin Island, it is a distorted worldview that puts so many people on their own island of insecurity.

Mandela looked out at the reality of Africa's Cape of Good Hope, but prisoners on an island of insecurity have their doubts compounded as they look across to the impossible to reach airbrushed idealistic world offered by the media. Crossing over seems impossible, and if it could be reached, it is an empty destination.

And so students learn to toughen up, focus on where they can gain confidence, and trust that others won't notice that they feel afraid, odd, or mismatched to their reality.

And in the midst of it all, they cling to what little they find that does provide some stability – maybe a hairstyle, an athletic talent, or a attitude that should have matured.

The most effective evangelist of our day understands this phenomenon of a generation imprisoned by their insecurities, and has built a remarkable industry out of offering her own brand of secular grace to those who feel imprisoned and are caught in the loneliness of believing they don't fit in.

Lady Gaga screams to her fans, "Jesus loves everybody." And produces hit songs that assure them, I completely accept you just like you are even if the rest of the world won't."

In fact, she calls her fans "her little monsters," because no matter how odd they feel, when they connect to her, they are completely normal.

You may or may not like her music, but you can't ignore that she has tapped into the deepest felt need of culture today – freedom from insecurity.

And while her theology has a long way to go to get straightened out, we have to admit, she's sharing the message that meets the longing of so many – that God does love me just like I am.

But of course, her message will eventually add to the insecurities, not relieve them, as her fans discover that her grace is hollow at the core. Only the transforming power of Christ that gives new vision, new heart, and new purpose, can allow those trapped by insecurity to accept themselves as being made in the image of God.

Lady Gaga's marketers figured out there are millions of people who are craving accepting grace rather than scolding judgment. But without the Gospel, there can be no grace that sustains.

And just for a bit of meddling, about which I'm not making suggestions but am very serious – don't think you're helping them if you ever embarrass students for not getting it right,

tightening the hoops they need to jump through in order to toughen them up, or being hard on grading to set a false standard.

I would strongly argue that is not teaching, but rather, that is piling on insecurity to emphasize the power differential that makes a faculty member, coach, or staff member feel better about themselves but is most likely to drive the student deeper into insecurities.

To be blunt, if your classes are filled with too many students who don't succeed, you'd better examine who's standing at the front of the room before you pass judgment on those who are sitting in the back of the room.

The eternal stakes of our calling are too high to hide behind the patterns of old school higher education – attempting to be rigid – when Jesus instructs us to extend grace.

Or to express that more articulately, listen to the words of Oswald Chambers in The Moral Foundations of Life. (*Christianity Today*, Vol. 32, no. 13.)

> God who made the birds never made birdcages; it is men who make birdcages, and after a while we become cramped and can do nothing but chirp and stand on one leg.
>
> The Spirit of God is always the spirit of liberty; the spirit that is not of God is the spirit of bondage, the spirit of oppression and depression.
>
> Jesus calls us to take Good News to the poor, comfort the brokenhearted, and release captives.

In other words, what Jesus promises is a total transformation.

All of us, who are followers of Christ can testify the transforming power of God to fulfill these promises in our lives. We've touched it, and lived it, so we know it's true.

But I think we'd also testify that doesn't mean all the challenges evaporate. And although, as much as we wish the Lord would wrap up our messes in a neat package within a reasonable time like the detectives always do on a TV show, God doesn't work that way.

He works in the view of eternity, so that while much transformation does take place in our lives, we must always remember this is only a glimmer of what is to come. And so, what may seem unfinished from our earthly perspective, is right on track from how God looks at it.

We often will quote part of Revelation 21, as if they are promises for the immediate and they are not. It doesn't mean these promise are any less real, but our immature view of eternity allows us to only catch a small fraction of what this means for our future.

He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever." And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making all things new!" (21:2-4)

The older I've gotten and watch families develop, the more I've come to realize that nobody gets a free pass through life without tough hard challenges that can only be carried by the grace of God.

It seems that every family has struggles and difficulties. Everyone will deal with more than a fair share of hard knocks. And for many, the circumstances of life pile on in an overwhelming wave without relief.

We have been given new life in Christ, but we still live in a fallen world. And even though Jesus has come to set our spirit free, we must live among the muck of sin's consequences all around us.

So as Paul writes about looking through a glass darkly, right now we can't see the full scope of God's plan, but we can have confidence he is sovereign and is planning great trees for his glory – and someday, we shall see the working out of God's plan with face to face clarity.

Tonight I began this message by telling you about my grandmother's grandfather who had strawberry buttons on his confederate uniform.

But let me end by telling you about my grandfather's grandfather on the other side of the family who also fought in the civil war.

James Forrester Parrott was born in North Carolina in 1830. His father died shortly after he was born, but his mother had a courageous sprit in her, and so traveled west to start a new life when James was 2 years old – with how many other kids we don't know.

While crossing the Cumberland Gap, James got the measles – which in those days, would put the all the children at risk. So his mother made the gut wrenching choice to leave him behind with a family named Miller, with the promise to come back for him later.

But she never returned.

When it became evident to the Miller's they were stuck with this child, they sold him to a family named Thompson and he became an indentured servant until, at age 20, he married a neighbor, Mahala Ann Bowman.

After 20 years of abandonment, for the first time in his life, James felt loved, and he thought Mahala hung the moon. Although, their bliss was short lived when their first son died when he was just a year old.

Two other sons, John Calvin, and Thomas Carol followed, and James was so thankful for his loving family, that when the civil war broke out he couldn't bring himself to leave them. So he didn't.

But two years into the war, the south was at risk and so he joined the 28th Consolidated Infantry as a Sergeant and tried to defend Atlanta in Sherman's March to the sea, and was later in many battles near Nashville.

His letters home tell of exorbitant prices for food, battles with little hope of winning, rampant sickness, and even of a $2 hymn book he bought as a gift for his beloved Mahala.

But mostly, his letters expressed a gut wrenching longing to go home to the only loving family he had experienced his entire life.

These emotions were so compelling that it was only the dishonor and the punishment of desertion that kept him in the ranks – and he does write home about one deserter who was caught, and how his General shook the young man's hand and cried, before they tied him to a stake and 12 riflemen fired – 6 with bullets and 6 with blanks.

The depth of his heartbreak and the hope of his love were captured beautifully in a letter he wrote from Rome, Georgia, where he was in the hospital for a month with Cholera.

Mahala Ann,

I *love you better than anybody in this world. I want to see you and kiss your sweet lips in token of my kind of love to you. I never knew what trouble was until I left home.*

We lived together 8 years lacking one day and a happy life we lived. It melts my heart to think that such lover as us has to be parted in such a manner as we are. A many a tear I have shed since I left home.

I have been in all those battles and through the blessing of God I have never been touched with a ball. I thank God for it. God has been my shield and I hope that he will be until I die.

What has been the cause of him being my friend? - I have asked him for his blessing. You wrote to me that you had prayed for me. I do believe that God has answered your prayer for he has blessed me in everything, and I request you to continue to ask God for to extend his blessings toward us as a family.

If we shall never see each other again in this life I hope that we will meet in heaven where there are no wars nor sickness nor troubles never come, but peace forever.

Pray for my future welfare. The prayers of the righteous matter much.

I want you to kiss my boys for me till I come home. Tell John and Thomas that their pap wants to hug and kiss them both bad.

I must come to a close. I want to hug and kiss your sweet lips and I feel confident that I will again. I remain your husband until death.

I love you. James

On November 30, 1864, James was in the front ranks in the attack on Union positions at Franklin, Tennessee. He was shot in the lower right foot shattering it, and was left at a Confederate hospital while the rest of the army went on to Nashville.

After the Confederates were routed, Union forces captured James on December 17, 1864 and his leg was amputated by Union doctor the day after Christmas.

He was moved to Louisville Prison and held there with 2,000 men until the war's end, when he swore to the Oath of Allegiance, was paroled, and hobbled 185 miles home.

After the war James and Mahala Ann farmed in the Rock Springs area of Overton County Tennessee. James carved his own wooden leg, and made it a habit to tie it to the saddle of his horse as he rode.

One day, three years later James rode out on the farm, but the horse came back to the house with only his wooden leg attached to the saddle. The family found James dead from a gunshot wound.

We don't know who murdered James, but Mahala's brother disappeared the same day as the murder and never was heard from again. His beloved Mahala Ann lived another 40 years but she never remarried, and was buried beside her husband in 1908.

That was a tough life, filled with much more sorrow than joy. And when I see their story, I want to assume they missed out on being great trees of righteousness. But from God's perspective they were planted for the Lord's glory because the story doesn't end there.

Their grandson, who lived down the road, Alonzo Leslie Parrott, was 16 when his grandmother died and I'm sure learned much from her tenacity and watched her faith.

He rode a mule to a one-room school-house. But by age 19 was working as a section hand on the railroad, when an itinerant evangelist, whose name has been forgotten, held a revival in the little town.

And on the morning after the night he was converted, that same evangelist put him on a train to Nashville with $3 in his pocket to attend a Christian college near where his grandfather lost his leg in the war.

Four years later when he graduated, the president said he was the only student to ever come to Trevecca Nazarene totally broke and leave with the college owing him money.

He went on from there to do a Masters Degree at what's now Rhodes College, and to become a pastor, banker, evangelist, and a college president.

And, it's at his desk where I work in my office today. My life would have been completely different had it not been for the tough life of James and Mahala Ann, and that $3 investment of an itinerant evangelist in education.

Sometimes, only with time and a glimpse of God's eternal perspective, can we see how the Lord plants trees that look frail us, and calls them great trees of righteousness.

Might we care for the students the Lord has entrusted to our care this year by:

watering them with grace,

fertilizing them with love,

and protecting them with generosity.

I pray that each of us will grow where God has planted us to serve our students – working in assurance that Jesus has come to

bring Good News to the poor,

comfort the broken hearted,

set the prisoners free.

And then … They will be called great trees of righteousness planted for His glory.