

GRTS 2018 Commencement Address

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Introduction

Greeting. Distinguished graduates; spouses, families and friends; alumni; faculty colleagues, members of the Cornerstone University board and administration, Dean VerBerkmoes and President Stowell, good evening. I am honored to speak to all of you this evening. I look back and remember with amazement that first commencement Beverly and I experienced together 47 years ago as the first members of both our families to go to college. This clearly ain't my first rodeo. For some time now I have thought if I ever received an opportunity to speak at a commencement, I would be compelled to speak on a certain text and topic. My time has come, and the faithful yet friendly wounds I have received from this text through the years are about to become yours.

Apology. First, I must apologize to you, the distinguished members of the GRTS class of 2018. You are under the impression that you have successfully answered all the necessary questions that are required for graduation. But I have one final question for you. Actually, you can relax, your graduation is not in jeopardy, at least from the question I'm asking tonight. My question has no bearing on your getting a diploma from GRTS, but it does bear directly on what you will do with that diploma. Your answer to this question is immensely more important than a credential signified by a piece of paper, even if it's a piece of paper that has cost you dearly in time and effort, not to mention tens of thousands of dollars.

Questions. So, think with me for a moment about questions and how they work. The use of questions is one of the most fascinating aspects of linguistics. There are *real questions*, those asked by people who are genuinely seeking information, like Peter's hearers on the Day of Pentecost who were convicted by the Spirit and asked "What should we do?" There are also *rhetorical questions*, those asked by writers and speakers who wish to draw their hearers more intensely into their discourse, like Paul's questions in Romans 8, beginning with "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Paul might have simply stated this as a bland proposition, "God is for us, so no one can ultimately stand against us," but if he had done so Romans 8 would have been less intense and less encouraging. Another thing about questions is that we can phrase them

in a way that leads to a positive answer, can't we? (YES!). But we would never ask a question that would make someone think we were smart seminary grads, would we? (NO!).

Examples. Pop culture is overflowing with famous questions, like the ones from a while back that begin with "Got . . .?" (Like "Got milk?"). Tonight our graduates are asking one another questions like, "Got diploma?" "Got that silly hat on straight?" "Got sleep deprivation?" "Got student loans?" One of the more profound questions I've ever heard in the pop culture comes in a doo wop song by Barry Mann and Gerry Goffin from 1961:

(I'd like to thank the man, who wrote the song,
that made my baby fall in love with me . . .)
Who put the bomp in the bomp, bah bomp bah bomp?
Who put the ram in the rama lama ding dong?
Who put the bop in the bop, shoo bop, shoo bop?
Who put the dip in the dip, da dip, da dip?
Who was that man, I'd like to shake his hand.
He made my baby fall in love with me.

Would you agree with me that the writer of this song is not sincerely seeking the information he appears to want? He's not, and what is cool about this song is that it is a mildly sarcastic parody of the doo wop music genre done in beautiful doo wop style.

We turn to a Beatles song for a couple questions that may be more relevant to our proceedings tonight. John Lennon asked these snarky questions in his song "Baby You're a Rich Man," which was the B-side of "All You Need is Love," originally released as a single in the summer of love, 1967, the year I graduated from high school. Lennon asked,

How does it feel to be one of the beautiful people?
Now that you know who you are, what do you want to be?
Now that you've found another key, what are you going to play?

Lennon had come from a humble upbringing to untold wealth, and perhaps he was asking this question to himself as much as to the educated, beautiful, wealthy world-travelers referenced in the song.

But wait, this is a *seminary* commencement, so we'd best move on to some memorable Bible questions. How about these . . .

- Did God actually say, "You shall not eat of any tree in the Garden"? (Gen 3:1)

- Adam, where are you? . . . Who told you that you were naked? (Gen 3:9, 11)
- Am I my brother's keeper? (Gen 4:9)
- Whom will I send, and who will go for us? (Isa 6:8)
- What does the Lord your God require of you . . . ? (Mic 6:8)
- Teacher, what is the great commandment in the law? (Matt 22:36)
- What good is it, brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith, but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? (Jas 2:14)
- Who is wise and understanding among you? (Jas 3:13)

And with this last question we turn to our text for this evening, James 3:13-18, a text which not only poses a question but also provides two answers, forcing us to make a choice. Will you read it with me?

James 3:13-18 (NIV)

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you?

Let them show it by their good life,

by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

¹⁴ *But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.*

¹⁵ ***Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.***

¹⁶ *For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

¹⁷ But **the wisdom that comes from heaven** is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

(This is the Word of the Lord).

Dualistic Structure. In this arresting passage James finishes his discussion of the untamable tongue by contrasting two kinds of wisdom that inform and guide human speech. He presents us with something of a sandwich in the ABA structure of this text. He first speaks of

authentic wisdom in verse 13. Then he turns to its counterfeit in verses 14-16 before returning to the real thing in verses 17-18.

You'll note in this text that James says nothing about nuances or degrees of wisdom—wisdom comes either from God or Satan, it operates either in either selfless humility or in selfish ambition. It leads either to peace—the personal-relational-social-cosmic wholeness of *shalom*—or it leads to chaos—the personal-relational-social-cosmic brokenness of sin. James' stark contrast between wholeness and brokenness agrees with the covenantal words of Moses, who said “I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction” (Deut 30:15). Elijah similarly presented two irreconcilable approaches to life when he said “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him” (1 Kgs 18:21). Our Lord Jesus put it this way, “Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the path that leads to destruction” (Matt 7:13). Paul spoke of the works of the flesh that characterized the old humanity and of the fruit of the Spirit that characterize the new humanity (Gal 5:16-24). The early second century anonymous Christian Jewish writer of the *Didache* echoed this way of thinking when he began his book with the words, “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways.” This sort of ethical dualism is also found in Augustine's *City of God*, in which he spoke of two kinds of human beings and of two kinds of human societies as two cities, one city living according to God in the Spirit, and the other city living according to fleshly human standards (*City of God* 14.2; 15.1). This dualism presents us with a fork in the road of life, leading us to one city or the other. Tonight we are faced with the most fundamental of choices about how we will use our educations. Which worldview will guide our use of the expertise signified by these master's degrees?

True and false wisdoms. In presenting these antithetical “wisdoms,” James doesn’t say anything about how many degrees a person can list after their name on their resumé, or whether they graduated with honors. He says nothing about a person’s attractiveness, or about their winsome personality, or about how many Twitter followers or Facebook friends they have. It’s not that any of these things are intrinsically good or bad but that they have nothing to do with whether a person is truly wise and understanding. If you want to know whether a person is wise and understanding, James says look at their lifestyle, whether it’s a lifestyle flowing from humility, because that is the acid test of wisdom. To put it another way, for James the good life is a life of good deeds, and a life of good deeds flows from humility, and that humility is the fundamental mark of wisdom. Without wisdom, there is no humility, and without humility there are no good deeds, and without good deeds there is no good life. Got it?!

Ominously, there is another “wisdom” mentioned here. We have a choice to make. In the starkest of contrasts with the wisdom that inspires humility that generates good deeds that constitute a good life, this sort of wisdom spawns selfish ambition, and that sort of ambition stirs up hubris against others, and that hubris leads to deeds which result in chaos and brokenness. Can we be more specific about this? In the very next paragraph of his letter James calls out selfish ambition and envy as what causes fights and quarrels in the church and what leads to self-centered prayers that go unanswered (James 4:1-3). Earlier in the letter he warned his audience to get rid of moral filth and humbly receive God’s implanted word (1:21). He described pure religion as looking after widows and orphans and avoiding the world’s crap (1:27). He calls out the church’s favoring the rich over the poor twice in chapter two (2:1-4, 14-17) as the cardinal example of dead faith that cannot save. He sums up what he means by the two sorts of wisdom in 4:6-10, which begins by referring to Proverbs 3:34:

“The Scripture says, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble’

Submit yourselves then, to God.

Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

Come near to God and he will come near to you.

Wash your hands, you sinners,

and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Grieve, mourn, and wail.

Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.”

Do you see just how important your answer to James’s question is? Remember, this text is like a sandwich. The wisdom-from-heaven sesame seed bun found in 13 and 17-18 is the good stuff, but you don’t want to consume the bad, wisdom-not-from-heaven stuff that’s in 14-16 on the inside of this sandwich. It’s not *au-graten*, it’s all rotten. It’s not a B-L-T, it’s a B-A-D, full of Boasting, Ambition, and Disorder. Where’s the beef? Not here, even if James Earl Jones shows up and claims “We’ve got the Meat!” It’s not a flame-broiled whopper, it’s a whopper of a lie cooked up in the flames of hell. It’s a diabolical burger, and that’s not good even if it has two all beef patties, special sauce, lettuce cheese, pickles and onions. Tonight this means that if we use the information and status we have gained here to promote ourselves, we will only exacerbate the world’s problems in any career we undertake. But if we use our education as a humble stewards of life-changing truth from heaven, our careers will serve to bring God’s peace into this troubled world.

Wisdom and the Grand Story, One difficulty we have in interpreting the wisdom material in the Bible is relating it to the grand story of redemption, the meta-narrative. Martin Luther’s

famous lack of appreciation for James was due to this- he couldn't seem to find much about the cross here. But there's really no such problem in James. In fact, notice how our text can be read as an implicit commentary or midrash on Genesis 1-3 and beyond. According to Genesis 1-2, Adam and Eve were created as God's imagers (Jas 3:9) and were given wisdom from heaven for their lives as priests in God's cosmic temple. But the adversary harbored selfish ambition and bitter envy and crashed Adam and Eve's primeval party. He boasted and denied the truth with an earthly, unspiritual, demonic anti-wisdom: *Did God really say . . .? You will not certainly die!* In an utterly inexplicable act of rebellion, our first parents exchanged the truth for a lie. You might even say they went on a low-wisdom diet. They discarded the sesame deed bun of heavenly wisdom and gobbled up the devil's earthy wisdom, a sort of poisonous protein. This plunged the human race inexorably into disorder and every evil practice. But God in amazing grace sent to us the incarnational quintessence of wisdom and understanding in the person of the Lord Jesus from heaven. Jesus showed us by his life what it means to be pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Then Jesus showed us by his death and resurrection how God could forgive our bitter envy and selfish ambition and transform us into people whose lives were shaped by humility and purity. This is cruciformity, the cross-shaped life. Then Jesus sent the Holy Spirit who would empower us to be peacemakers, agents of the reconciliation accomplished by Jesus on the cross, sowing seeds of gospel peace to yield a bumper crop of justice.

Conclusion

James began chapter three of his letter by warning his audience of the heightened accountability of those who teach. This warning calls us to both accurate content and lives which accurately model that content. Tonight I am reminded of the old saying that even if you load up a

donkey with books, it's still just a donkey! We must draw wisdom from the transforming power of God's word and apply God's values to the information that presents in any situation. The devil believes in God (Jas 2:19), and he knows the Bible (Matt 4:6). He has a wisdom of sorts—from primeval times he has applied his hubris to situations in order to aggrandize himself and ruin God's creation, especially God's human imagers. How does your wisdom differ from his? What fundamental values will you bring to bear on the situations that God's providence presents you in life and ministry?

And so, tonight, the final question of your educational career at GRTS is “who is wise and understanding among you?” We thank James for posing this most basic of questions and for providing an answer which cuts through all the complexities of human existence in a fallen world. James speaks to us in a simple and un-academic manner that even a seminary professor can understand! James explains that there are but two *sources* of knowledge, two *uses* of knowledge, and two *results* of using knowledge, and that these are utterly antithetical.

Two sources- wisdom from above or from below

Two ways to use it- humility or pride

Two consequences- shalom or chaos

Prideful use of earthly wisdom leads to brokenness. Humble use of heavenly wisdom leads to wholeness.

How you will use the information you have acquired during your time at GRTS? You will need to scrutinize the teaching of even your most respected professors to make sure it squares with heaven's wisdom. You will need to continue to evaluate the latest theories about exegesis, theology, pastoral ministry, cultural intelligence, and counseling with the same scrutiny. Most important of all is the continual scrutiny of your own hearts to check whether the

narrative of your career parallels the cruciform narrative of Jesus Christ, whose exaltation came only after he abandoned his heavenly status, humbled himself on earth, and endured the death of the cross. When the tempter asks you, “Did God really say . . .?”, you will need to answer “Get out of my face, devil, God already wrote about you. I’ve got wisdom from heaven. Yes, God really did say this, and I will die *if* I disobey him, so I will die *before* I disobey him.”

Those who respond to earth’s testings with heaven’s wisdom will use their educational status in humbly serving others. The result will be peace, beautiful wholeness in people’s psyches and relationships and churches and neighborhoods, until the day the Prince of peace returns to make his peace gush forth like a fountain and flow like a river that floods this world with justice and righteousness, to the glory of our great God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Prayer

Dear Father, most generous giver of every good gift, you brought us forth by your gracious Word. Remind us that education, like faith, is dead unless it is accompanied by works done in the humility that comes from wisdom. Help us to be agents of Jesus’ reconciliation who through your Spirit bring your goodness to this broken world for your glory alone. And so, like Solomon before us, we ask in faith for that wisdom in the name of Jesus. Amen!