

## HOW DO YOU WANT TO BE REMEMBERED?

1 Kings 17:24; 2 Corinthians 3:18

Baccalaureate Address

Mount Vernon Nazarene College

May 1991

Dr. E. LeBron Fairbanks

Assuming you have approximately fifty years left to live, when you come to the end of those fifty years, and you have nothing but death to look forward to and nothing but memories to look back upon, what will you need to see in order for you to come to the conclusion: "My life was a success."

How do you want to be remembered?

Let me challenge you with a text that I have lived with this year.

1 Kings 17:24 states: *"Then the woman said to Elijah, 'Now by this I know that you are a man of God, that the word of the Lord in your mouth is true.'*"

What a tribute ... what a testimony. What did the lady mean by the words, *"Now by this I know....* What did Elijah do to rate such a glowing testimony from the lady?

He had provided food for a lady and her son, after which the son died. The woman thinks the son's death was brought about to remind her of her past sins. Elijah prays for the son, and he is restored. The text follows: *"Now by this I know you are a man of God."*

When you come to the end of life on earth, with nothing but death before you, nothing but memories to cling to, what lifelong goals will you need to pursue so that you will be *remembered* as a man or woman of God, and that the words you speak about the Lord are true.

I want to suggest three lifelong goals for you to pursue.

### THE GOAL OF A "CHRIST-LIKE" LIFE

II Corinthians 3:18 tells us that, as Christians living in vital relationship with Christ, we are being shaped and transformed, increasingly, through every experience of life into His likeness.

Yet how many of you feel like Abraham Lincoln with his difficulties when you think of the setbacks you encounter in your lifetime pursuit of Christlikeness. Are you aware that...

At 22 years of age, he failed in business.

At 23 he ran for the legislature and was defeated.

At 24 he again failed in a business venture.

At 25 he was elected to the state legislature.

At 26 his sweetheart died.

At 27 he had a nervous breakdown.

At 29 he was defeated as Speaker of the House.

At 34 he was defeated for Congress.

At 37 he was finally elected to Congress.

At 39 he was defeated for Congress.

At 46 he was defeated for the Senate.

At 47 he was defeated for the Vice-Presidency.

At 49 he was again defeated for the Senate.

At 51 he was elected President of the United States.

If you lost count, nine defeats, two setbacks, three wins.

And the last win, a win for our country.

Often, we experience a "marked distinction between heart purity and maturity of character." Our hearts can be single-mindedly focused on doing God's will, but we so often fall far short of our goal. Remember ... we are being transformed into His likeness.

At the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in Manila, Philippines, we often sang, "In my life, Lord, be glorified, be glorified. In my life, Lord, be glorified today." But we often think that to bring glory to God we must do "great and mighty" deeds.

Let me tell you something else about Lincoln. In October 1863, President Lincoln decided to attend the dedication ceremonies of the Gettysburg, Pennsylvania National Cemetery. Although the planning commission had already asked the silver-tongued Edward Everett to deliver the dedication speech, as a courtesy, they invited President Lincoln to bring a "few appropriate remarks."

There was little time for preparation and Lincoln was worried over his words. On the morning of the ceremony, Lincoln copied his address onto two small pages and tucked

them into his coat pocket...put on his stovepipe hat and joined the procession of dignitaries. Everett was introduced. His words rang smoothly. Lincoln stared in fascination. Finally, one hour and fifty-seven minutes later, the orator took his seat as the crowd roared its enthusiastic approval.

Lincoln was introduced. Slipping on his spectacles, he held the two pages in his right hand and grabbed his lapel with his left. He never moved his feet or made any gesture with his hands. His voice was high-pitched, almost squeaky. As he spoke the words which we know as "The Gettysburg Address," people listened on tiptoe.

Suddenly, he was finished. No more than two minutes after he had begun, he stopped. His talk had been so prayer-like it seemed almost inappropriate to applaud.

Over one hundred twenty years have passed since that historic event. Can anyone recall one line from Everett's two-hour Gettysburg address? Depth, not length, is important. Lincoln's two minutes have become among the most memorable two minutes in the history of our nation.

Graduates, whatever your service to the Lord, be it great or small, successful or unsuccessful, noticed or unnoticed, seen or unseen, do it to the glory of God and to the best of your ability. Through these experiences, you are being shaped and transformed increasingly into His likeness. Believe this, regardless of the number of setbacks you may encounter.

Just as Abraham Lincoln was not defeated ultimately by the difficulties in his life, so you can live a Christlike life and not be defeated by the difficulties and setbacks that come your way.

And there is yet another goal to pursue.

## **THE GOAL OF AN "OTHERS-FOCUSED" LIFE**

Have you heard of Teddy Stallard? Probably not! I first hear of Teddy Stallard from Anthony Campolo in a sermon at San Diego '89 - a mission and ministry conference for college-age students.

Teddy Stallard certainly qualified as "one of the least." Disinterested in school. Musty, wrinkled clothes; hair never combed. One of those kids in school with a deadpan face, expressionless--sort of glassy, unfocused stare. When Miss Thompson, his fifth-grade teacher, spoke to Teddy he always answered in monosyllables. Unattractive, unmotivated, and distant, he was just plain hard to like. Even though his teacher said she loved all in her class the same, down inside she wasn't being completely truthful.

Teddy's records told Miss Thompson more about Teddy than she wanted to admit. The records read:

1st Grade	Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but poor home situation.
2nd Grade	Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.
3rd Grade	Teddy is a good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.
4th Grade	Teddy is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest.

Christmas came and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her Christmas presents. They piled their presents on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. Among the presents there was one from Teddy Stallard. She was surprised that he had brought her a gift, but he had. Teddy's gift was wrapped in brown paper and was held together with scotch tape. When she opened Teddy's present, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume.

The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk over Teddy's gifts, but Miss Thompson at least had enough sense to silence them by immediately putting on the bracelet and putting some of the perfume on her wrist. Holding her wrist up for the other children to smell she said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?" And the children, taking their cue from the teacher, readily agreed.

At the end of the day, when school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to her desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson... Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother and her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you liked my presents." When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her for her negative attitude towards Teddy.

The next day when the children came to school, they were welcomed by a new teacher. Miss Thompson had become a different person. She was no longer just a teacher; she had become an agent of God. She was now a person committed to loving her children and doing things for them that would live on after her. She helped all the children, but especially the slow ones, and particularly Teddy Stallard. By the end of that school year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He had caught up with most of the students and was even ahead of some.

She didn't hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day, she received a note that read: Dear Miss Thompson: I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class. Love, Teddy Stallard

Four years later, another note came. Dear Miss Thompson: They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it. Love, Teddy Stallard

And four years later, this note. Dear Miss Thompson: As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now. Dad died last year. Love, Teddy Stallard

Miss Thompson went to that wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat. She deserved to sit there; she had done something for Teddy that he could never forget.

There will be Teddy Stallards to whom you can give yourself! Be very generous. Give yourself to "one of the least" whom you could help to become one of the greatest.

What can you give?

An hour of your time to someone who needs you.

A note of encouragement to someone who is down.

A hug of affirmation to someone in your family.

A visit of mercy to someone who is laid aside.

A meal you prepared to someone who is sick.

A word of compassion to someone who has just lost a mate.

A deed of kindness to someone who is a slow learner and overlooked.

I'm suggesting to you this evening, three lifelong goals for you to pursue.

The goal of a "Christ-like" life.

The goal of an "Others-focused" life. And finally,

## **THE GOAL OF A "FULL-ORBED" LIFE**

How many of us have used the phrase, "I can't wait..."? Some of you have made that statement in relationship to graduation from MVNC. Others use it in relationship to a marriage, or a job, or when you pay off the school loans.

We act as if life will really begin when certain things happen in the future. All of us can get so good at that waiting we never act. "Maybe ... someday!" And we let the opportunities slip away. We have this crazy idea that until we're everything we should be, we need to put most of life on hold. Like having friends over for ice cream. Or going on a picnic. Like using crystal and fine china. Or celebrating a birthday. Like slipping away for a weekend of relaxation. Or traveling abroad. Like planning ahead and spending a week away with the family. "No - not now, not this year; but maybe, someday...."

This tendency to "put off living" until another day hit home to me recently. In the closing chapter of the book, *The Quest for Character*, the author shared an article that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. I was so shaken by the article that I shared it with my family. A lady named Ann Wells wrote the following article:

My brother-in-law opened the bottom drawer of my sister's bureau and lifted out a tissue-wrapped package.

"This," he said, "is not a slip. This is lingerie." He discarded the tissue and handed me the slip. It was exquisite: silk, handmade and trimmed with a cobweb of lace. The price tag with an astronomical figure on it was still attached.

"Jan bought this the first time we went to New York, at least eight or nine years ago. She never wore it. She was saving it for a special occasion. Well, I guess this is the occasion. He took the slip from me and put it on the bed with the other clothes we were taking to the mortician. His hands lingered on the soft material for a moment, then he slammed the drawer shut and turned to me. "Don't ever save anything for a special occasion. *Every day you're alive is a special occasion.*"

I remembered those words through the funeral and the days that followed when I helped him and my niece attend to all the sad chores that follow an unexpected death.

I'm still thinking about his words, and they've changed my life.... "I'm not "saving" anything; we use our good china and crystal for every special event--such as losing a pound, getting the sink unstopped, the first camellia blossom....

"Someday" and "one of these days" are losing their grip on my vocabulary. If it's worth seeing or hearing or doing, I want to see and hear and do it *now*. I'm trying very hard not to put off, hold back, or save anything that would add laughter and luster to our lives. And every morning when I open my eyes I tell myself that it is special.

Graduates, times will be hard and people may be demanding, but never forget, life is special. All of life is a gift of God to be celebrated and affirmed. The pleasure and the

pain. The Wednesdays as well as the weekends. Every day is a special day. God is at work in you.

*This is the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it. So live every moment to the fullest - with profound gratitude to God. - Don't let routines of life rob your joy. Stay sweet. Be positive. Stand tall. Face each dawn with a fresh resolve. You are being conformed to the image of Christ. He who began a good work in you will complete it. Believe this! And be glad!*

## **CONCLUSION**

How do you want to be remembered?

When life is closing in on you, and you have nothing but death to look forward to and nothing but memories to look back upon, what will you need to see in order for you to come to the conclusion "my life was a success?"

I pray that, regardless of your vocation accomplishments and attainments, you will be remembered as a man or woman of God who, throughout life, pursued:

- \* The goal of a Christ-like life.
- \* The goal of an others-focused life, and
- \* The goal of a full-orbed life.

Make it so, Lord. Amen!