

Commencement

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

05 15 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Grease DVD clip: 1:37:50 – 1:38:50

Introduction

Our graduating seniors studied Shakespeare in English literature; so I KNOW that they all recall Act I, Scene II of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare! But for the rest of you, let me summarize.

A young man named Laertes is departing for France. His father, Polonius, finds him a few minutes before the ship sails. Polonius offers him some fatherly advice, including warnings to guard his character, bridle his tongue, choose his friends wisely, dress modestly, and “*neither a borrower nor a lender be.*” The advice is well-intentioned but ill-received. Laertes listens impatiently until receiving his allowance; then he bids his father a hasty farewell.

This scene in *Hamlet* is reenacted by every generation. Parents stand on one side of the stage with the wisdom of experience. Children stand on the other side with the certainty of adolescence. Parents speak, but children seldom listen.

Today we honor our young people who are graduating from high school. Imagine you could share some advice with these young adults. Stretch your imagination even further and pretend they might listen! What would you say? What are the real secrets to success?

I. Baccalaureate Address

I have enjoyed the opportunity to speak at **baccalaureate** services in the past. In all honesty, I’m not sure how much the graduating seniors really hear. A speaker at a baccalaureate is like a body at a funeral: you need one for the service, but no one expects him to say much!

In the past, I have shared with graduates timeless bits of advice from my vast wisdom that I am certain that they treasured. For example:

- Check your oil and tire pressure.
- Separate your laundry. Don’t wash whites with darks—I learned this one the hard way.
- If you’re going to college, the first semester is critical to your success.
- Study—then play.
- Tear up all credit card applications
- People are not impressed by how much you can drink—and if they are, then you need a better set of friends.
- If you’re going to be dumb, then you need to be tough.
- Never criticize the person signing your paycheck
- The most boring word in the English language is “I.”
- Be nice to the little people—you are one!

- Wear clean underwear in case you are in an accident—actually, I advise wearing clean underwear on general principles alone!
- Call your mama!

Like Polonius with Laertes, this is the kind of advice each generation of adults share with its young; and each generation of teenagers ignores in turn. Most of life's lessons must be learned on our own in the tough school of hard knocks.

A man in his early 30s was unexpectedly made president of the bank. He never dreamed he would be president at such a young age. So he approached the venerable Chairman of the Board and said, "I was wondering if you could share with me your secret to success?"

The old man responded with two words: "**Right decisions!**" The young man had hoped for a bit more than this, so he said, "That's really helpful, and I appreciate it, but can you be more specific? How do I make right decisions?"

The wise old man simply answered, "**Experience.**"

The young man said, "Well, that's just the point of my being here. I don't have the kind of experience I need. How do I get it?"

The older man answered with two words, "**Wrong decisions!**"

Experience is a tough teacher—it gives the test first and THEN teaches the lesson. But oftentimes it's the only way that we learn.

II. Transitions

Friday night these seniors will walk across the stage and receive their diplomas. School will be locked away forever in a safety deposit box filled with memories and mementos. Parents will cry, teachers sigh, speakers choke up, and graduates tear up. Graduation marks a critical moment of transformation and transition.

Life's journey is marked by many such **milestones**. Although we live with the illusion that our lives remain the same, we are constantly changing and entering new phases with unique opportunities and challenges. Examples:

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| ➤ Birth | ➤ Children |
| ➤ First day of school | ➤ New job, home, community, etc. |
| ➤ Graduation | ➤ Retirement |
| ➤ Marriage | |

Each transition is an ending; and each ending is a new beginning. A semi-colon--not a period--marks the end of the sentence. For those who stayed awake in English class, a semi-colon serves as a reminder that more is yet to be said. Every transition in life is both frightening and exciting, an old ending and a new beginning, filled with dread and anticipation. Commencement and graduation—a new start.

Today I could waste my time giving our seniors advice. Instead, I would prefer to serve as a **guide** for the graduates. A guide walks beside someone else and helps show

the way. A good guide cannot anticipate everything that will happen along life's journey. However, he can help equip others for the adventures ahead. Along the way, everyone in the party learns something about themselves and one another.

III. Possibles

The early **frontiersmen** who pushed into the unknown regions of America ventured far from civilization. The pioneers carried what they called their "**Possibles.**" Today we would call it a survival kit.

A brass case was born on a strap over the shoulder with flint, iron, and tinder to make a fire. A knife on the belt along with a gun, power, and shot completed their possibles. Even if all else was lost, these items made it possible to survive and thrive in the wilderness.

I enjoy deer **hunting** in the fall. If you're not into hunting, don't fret. I walk and watch a lot more than hunt—why ruin a good hunting trip by shooting something? The local deer population has remained unharmed during my eleven years in Bartow County.

When I go into the woods, I carry my own "possibles" in a **hip pack** around my waist. It contains what I consider to be essential for the day's journey and any unforeseen events. I would like to share the contents with you today.

A. Knife

The first item I *always* carry is a **knife**. There's just something manly about carrying a knife—so I carry three! There's a Rambo knife good for cutting down shrubs and trees. This fancy one doubles as a TV remote and espresso machine. Yet I always end up using this simple lock-blade with a sharp edge.

Graduates, your parents, teachers, coaches, and other adults have spent almost two decades providing you with an education. But now I want to confirm something that you have probably long suspected: most of what you learned in high school is absolutely useless in real life! In 20 plus years of ministry, I have yet to have someone in counseling plead, "Can you explain logarithms and sentence diagrams to me one more time?"

But education is much more than math theorems, science experiments, and English conjugations. Education is not so much about what you know as who you are. My best teachers did not show me what to do but who to be. Education provides the basic tools necessary to deal with unforeseen adventures ahead.

Word ----- World ----- Wisdom

Sometimes the early pioneers lost even the basic possibles necessary for existence in the wilderness; but they still survived. For the most important possibilities are not carried over your shoulder but in your head and heart and soul.

B. Safety Strap

The second item in my pack is a **safety strap**. This is a seat belt designed for trees. There are two types of tree stand hunters in the world: those who have slipped and those who will slip. The leading cause of hunting accidents is falling out of trees.

Part of the art of parenting is balancing freedom and limits with children. How much is enough but not too much? Wise parents set constantly changing boundaries and parameters for their growing children.

As children become adults, they must set their own limits. Parents pray they have internalized lessons about alcohol, drugs, sex, education, hard work, honesty, integrity, and faith. However, we all carry a little teenage rebellion within our hearts.

God has created the world with both physical and spiritual laws. Parents warn not to touch a hot pan or cross the street without looking in order to protect their children. In the same way, God's law warns us of spiritual danger. The Ten Commandments are not designed to keep us from having fun but to guard against danger. Spiritual principles are like guard rails on a mountain road. They are intended to help us enjoy the journey safely.

This fall many of you will be on your own for the first time in your life. The first months away from home can make or break a college experience and a career. Make wise choices.

Safety straps are a real nuisance in a tree stand. They're always getting in the way—until you fall. Then you discover what a handy thing they can be.

Bible: God's Word. God's parameters for life. Within the parameters of God's law, we are called to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

C. Bandages

The third thing I always carry is **bandages**. Life is messy. Stuff happens. We live in a fallen world where we all collect our share of bruises, stitches, and scars. Most here have already learned this painful fact. The rest soon will.

No guide can anticipate when disaster will strike. Yet our response to crises defines who we are. Chuck Colson wrote that life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we respond.

Scripture teaches that adversity can aid in our growth and maturation as God's people. The New Testament letter of James says that tribulation leads to maturity in faith. This is more than an optimistic attitude that says, "*When life gives you lemons, make lemon-aid!*" Instead, it is a dependence upon God's grace and strength in times of hardship and weakness.

D. Whistle

The fourth item I always carry with me is a **whistle**. Even the best prepared travelers will sometimes encounter situations beyond their own resources. We need one another's help. A voice might grow hoarse and fail, but a whistle sounds loudly while there is breath.

God did not make us solitary individuals. We are created for community. We need one another, and others need us. Call your family. Call your friends. Call me.

The Church.

E. Compass

Perhaps the most important thing to carry in the wilderness is a compass. We live in a confusing world with many voices that call us to follow diverting paths. It is easy to get lost in the woods along the way.

But true north never changes. A compass cannot direct ever step along the way, however, it does keep one going in the right direction. There are many things I would hope and wish for each of you. But the most important is the sure knowledge that you are a loved and cherished child of God. Hear the call of Jesus Christ: "*Come and follow me.*"

GPS versus compass.

IV. Limitless Possibilities

There is one final item in my pack. However, it cannot be seen. It is the gift of hope that foresees God's future. One of the things I love about high school graduation is the sense of limitless possibilities. For one brief, shining moment, anything could be possible. No matter your age, all things are still possible with God.

In his book entitled *Uh-Oh*, Robert Fulghum wrote:

"Walk into a kindergarten and then a high school. The environments differ only in scale. They each have the same opportunities and facilities. Tools for reading and writing, scientific equipment, the arts, are all present But the most important difference is in the self-image of the students.

Ask a kindergarten class, "How many of you can **draw?**" All the hands shoot up! What you want to draw? A tyrannosaurus rex eating cupcakes with a pink poodle? No problem.

How many of you can **sing?** All hands. What do you sing? Anything? What if you don't know the words? No problem--we'll make them up!

Can you **dance?** Of course, we can all dance! What kind of music? What does it matter? Let's dance now!

Their answer is Yes! Over and over again. Yes! The children are confident in spirit, infinite in resources, and eager to learn. Everything is possible.

Try these same questions with a high school crowd. A small percentage of the students will raise their hands when asked if they draw or sing or dance. Not infrequently, they will go on to qualify their answers. "I only draw landscapes. I can only sing in the shower. I only slow dance."

What happened along the way? What happened to the "YES! Of course, I can!"

Conclusion

<p>One day a store manager noticed a small boy standing at the bottom of an escalator staring intently at the steps as they disappeared from view. The man walked over and asked, "Son, are you lost?"</p>
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"Nope."

"Waiting for your parents?"

"Un-uh."

Exasperated, the manager said "Well then, just what are you doing?"

Never taking his eyes off the steps, the boy replied, "I dropped my bubble gum, and I'm waiting for it to come back around."

Seniors, you hold endless possibilities in your hands today. Yet this moment will never come back around again. Today is the best day to dedicate yourself to God's service and depend upon the guidance that the Spirit alone provides. Use the tools that the Lord gives you and walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

The future is yours, and with faith, "*All things are possible for those who trust in the Lord.*"