

A Delightful Inheritance
Christopher C. Burkett
Ashland University Baccalaureate Service
December 16, 2007

It is a real pleasure for me to be with you on this happy occasion. Let me first congratulate you students for the hard work and effort that you have put into improving yourselves through your education at Ashland University. This is a day on which you should be proud of yourselves; and your families should be proud of your accomplishment as well. Over the last four years you have spent many hours in the classroom, engaging in discussions outside of class with friends and professors, staying up late to read books and write papers, and cramming all night for exams. And so you deserve this day of rest and celebration with friends and loved ones. Some of you might need to take more than just this day to get caught on the rest you have done without over the last few weeks; and if you get the chance in the coming weeks you should take the time to enjoy some of the good things life has to offer before you assume your new responsibilities in life. But know that that time will come, and when it does these days spent in the relative paradise of university life will seem like dreams from a lost golden age.

And so this is a day for giving thanks to the Lord for the good that you have received through your education, and a day for reflecting on the great challenges that lie ahead in your lives. Our Scripture reading for this morning, from the Book of Psalms (Psalm 1:1-3,6a and Psalm 16:5-9,11), deals with these very things, for it tells us something about how to find happiness, despite the uncertainty and trials of life. The first part of the Psalm tells us that to attain happiness we must refuse the counsel of the wicked. But the “delight” of the blessed or happy man is in meditation, particularly meditation on the “law of the Lord.” It is through the contemplation of the nature of God and His design and purpose for human beings that the happy man, like a well watered tree, yields fruit in all that he does, and his happiness never withers. But it is not simply the meditation or the seeking of knowledge that leads to great pleasures, for the blessed man also “does” – knowledge must be accompanied by works. Our happiness will depend upon the goodness of our works, and the righteousness of our actions will depend to a large extent upon the degree to which we have acquired wisdom through contemplation of the Lord and His intent for us as human beings.

All of these things – wisdom, work, and the happiness that can be achieved by them – are part of what King David calls in the Psalm the “delightful inheritance” that we receive from

the Lord. And it is these things – the good things that we have “inherited” – that I want to focus on this morning. We should not take this inheritance for granted, though we often do. It is part of the challenge of life, and the great task with which God has charged us all, to make the most out of the things we have inherited.

The ability to attain happiness is itself one of the greatest gifts that men have inherited from God. We know this not only from Scripture. The greatest thinkers on human nature – from Aristotle to John Locke – have concluded that happiness is the highest good and the ultimate end of human life. Aristotle, for example, tells us that every human action aims at promoting happiness. But he also tells us that happiness does not consist solely in the pursuit of physical pleasure or the accumulation of wealth, although some degree of both, in moderation he says, is not unimportant in the life of the blessed man. Rather happiness, he says, is found mainly in activity itself, and not just physical activity but the activity of the soul and the work of the mind. And, he tells us, acting well or ill is a reflection of the activity of the soul. A sound mind and a good soul will produce good works, and it is the goodness of our activity – our work – that will contribute to or detract from our felicity. Thus we learn also from the Book of Ecclesiastes, *“I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion.”* (Ecclesiastes 3:22)

The very ability to work, therefore, and to derive happiness from our work, is part of the delightful inheritance that we as men have received from the Lord. To continue from Ecclesiastes, *“Every man to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God. For he shall not much remember the days of his life; because God answers him in the joy of his heart.”* (Ecclesiastes 5:19-20) In other words, if you delight in your work because it is good, the happiness you experience throughout life will make all of the troubles and hardships you have endured seem trivial.

Along with the gift of work comes the gift of liberty, the ability God has given to men to choose their actions freely. But with liberty we also inherit great responsibility, for the use we make of our freedom can lead to either benefit or harm, justice or injustice, virtue or vice, and thus also to either happiness or misery. God has given us liberty as the means to winning happiness, but in His goodness he has left us free to merit, by our own actions, either happiness or misery. In this sense, happiness or misery, success or failure, is in our own hands.

We are charged by God, therefore, with great responsibilities. The first is that we must make the fullest use of our liberty in the choice of our work and our actions, for it is a great gift, and we will be judged according to whether we squander it or make use of it in our lives. The

second charge is that we defend our liberty and not surrender it to the “counsels of the wicked.” As Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians, *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.”* (Galatians 5:1) Finally, we must be ever careful to avoid following freedom down the path of licentiousness, for as Peter tells us in his first epistle, *“So is the will of God, that with well doing you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.”* (1 Peter 2:15-16)

In America, especially, we should never take for granted the liberty with which we have been blessed. Having studied some history during your time here at Ashland University, most of you know that liberty was the watchword during the time of the American Founding and the cause for which we fought the Revolution. But that American love for liberty did not arise spontaneously in 1776; rather, love of liberty had grown in the hearts of Americans almost from the first time they set foot on these shores. For over one hundred years, preachers, especially, had been instructing Americans in their sermons that liberty was a gift from God, and that it must be used in accordance with His designs for our felicity – that is, that liberty is the means by which we can do good works, and is not intended to be used for the wrong ends. One Boston preacher, John Tucker, said in a 1771 sermon:

The great and wise Author of our being, has so formed us, that the love of liberty is natural. This passion, like all other original principles of the human mind, is, in itself perfectly innocent, and designed for excellent purposes, though [it is] liable, through abuse, of becoming a cause of mischief to ourselves and others.

In another sermon from 1776, the reverend Samuel West instructed Americans on the true meaning of liberty, saying, *“If we consult our happiness and real good, we can never wish for an unreasonable liberty, viz., a freedom to do evil...To have a liberty to do whatever is fit, reasonable, or good, is the highest degree of freedom that rational beings can possess.”*

And this is where we begin to see the importance of learning and knowledge, for without these one is less likely to make the proper choices in life, and more likely to squander or abuse the gift of liberty. As we heard in the Psalm, the blessed man seeks knowledge, and “even at night,” he says, “my heart instructs me.” Therefore is his heart glad, for meditation and learning have shown him the “path of life.”

But knowledge and learning are not by themselves enough to lead us to happiness; knowledge for its own sake is worthless, unless it is employed to improve our works and our actions, especially in relation to our fellow human beings. As George Washington famously wrote to his sixteen-year-old nephew as he began his academic studies, *“A good moral*

character is the first essential in a man...It is therefore highly important that you should endeavor not only to be learned but virtuous."

Knowledge applied to our actions, as Aristotle says, is what we call wisdom, for wisdom tells us what kind of good things we ought to aim for in life through our actions, and what kind of bad things we ought to avoid. If we are lacking in wisdom concerning what things are just, beautiful, and true, our actions will be directed at bad ends and will therefore also be unjust, ugly, and false – and to such a one, true happiness will ever remain unattainable. Thus, as the Bible repeatedly tells us, wisdom is invaluable for happiness:

Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed. (Proverbs 3:13-18)

This is why this morning's Psalm tells us that the blessed man finds delight in meditating on the law of the Lord, for it is by contemplation of God's nature and his design for creation that we acquire a kind of wisdom that elevates our thoughts concerning ourselves, and increases awareness of our duties to God and man. As another early American preacher, Samuel Kendal, said in an 1804 sermon:

Contemplation of God provides a clearer view "of the divine character, and of the duty and destiny of man; and furnishes the strongest motives to virtue by inspiring new and more sublime hopes...It introduces into the mind the idea of goodness, or grace, as the connecting link between men and their Creator; by which they may rise to a resemblance of the great standard of moral excellence...It enforces every precept of virtue by the consideration that present behavior will affect our future condition; that God is the witness, and will be the judge of our conduct....It forbids the indulgence of the selfish passions, and encourages a generous philanthropy...[It] enlightens the mind and improves the heart."

We mainly acquire knowledge, and hopefully wisdom, through our education. And this makes the particular kind of education that you have received at Ashland University one of the greatest gifts one can inherit. I am speaking specifically of a liberal arts education, sometimes just called a liberal education. It is called "liberal" for two reasons. Liberality was a classical virtue akin to generosity, and a liberal education is one that is "generous" in the array of fields and courses that students are required to take. But the word "liberal" also comes from the

Latin word for liberty or freedom. The goal of such an education is to create free human beings, in the sense that they are liberated from blind opinion and narrow prejudice. This is accomplished by requiring students to take courses in a number of different fields, thus broadening and deepening your understanding of God and his creation, including man. Whether it was a class in which you read great works of literature, or explored the mysteries of the world through scientific research; whether it was a class on the beauty of art or nature, on the culture of ancient civilizations, on managing a business, or on how to teach kindergartners an appreciation of music – all of these, when taken together, are meant to expose you to the heights of human excellence and accomplishment, and to enrich your appreciation of God’s generosity in making these good and beautiful things possible.

It is true that your education has helped to prepare you for a professional career; but more importantly it ought to have prepared you for life. In other words, a liberal arts education ought to provide you with the knowledge that is the foundation of wisdom, which will in turn allow you to make good use of the liberty wherein God has intended men to be free.

A liberal education ought to challenge your opinions, and provoke you to question what you think you already know about the world. Even if you are leaving this university with the same opinions that you brought with you four years ago, you should at least have a better understanding as to why you believe them to be true. Perhaps the greatest thing you should have inherited from your liberal arts education is the ability to think for yourselves, and to freely contemplate what is just, beautiful, and true. This is the essence of liberty – it is the essence of what it means to be a free human being, and this is a great defense against falling prey to the enslaving “counsels of the wicked.”

As a means to wisdom, liberty and virtue, a liberal arts education is one of the greatest treasures that you have inherited. Its importance was understood by the Reverend Samuel Kendal in the same sermon I quoted earlier. *“To remain free,”* he says, *“a people must be enlightened and virtuous; and in order to promote this, they must cherish institutions calculated to promote knowledge and virtue.”* This is good advice, and we should heed it. I say this from personal experience, for the liberal arts education I received from this very University – many years ago – is one of the greatest gifts that I have inherited.

And speaking of advice, no address to graduates would be complete without some general advice from the speaker on how to go about pursuing happiness. In doing so I will heed the words of George Washington, who said, *“Give not Advice without being Ask’d, & when desired do it briefly.”* Well, I have been asked, but I will try to keep it brief. In fact I will limit myself to two general pieces of advice.

My first advice is this: work hard, but be patient. As graduating students, you should already know something about hard work. If you don't, you soon will. It is important to work hard in order to make good use of our inheritance from the Lord. As we read in the Book of Proverbs, *"He that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster."* (Proverbs 18:9) But it is often a mark of youth to be impatient. Full of energy and ambition, young men and women often expect to have made their fortune by age thirty, or to be named CEO of a business by twenty-five, and so on. As is natural, they only seek what they believe will contribute to their happiness. But true happiness comes only with the fullness of life, from the steady and constant application of our talents through our work, and in the patient and diligent fulfillment of our duties and responsibilities, both in professional and private life. Good work will eventually be repaid in measure; in the meantime, take the advice of Paul in his letter to the Romans: *"Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."* (Romans 12:12)

My second piece of advice also comes from this same letter of Paul, who says, *"Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."* (Romans 12:2) Amid the often unrelenting rush of work, of taking care of your family, and of fulfilling your other responsibilities, take the time to contemplate the higher things whenever those rare opportunities present themselves. Renew the pleasure that you have, hopefully, experienced during your studies here in college. Read books – the old books are generally best, because they tell us something fundamental about what it means to be a human being, and they broaden our understanding of the nature of God's creation. Elevate the activity of your soul and continue your pursuit of knowledge, so that you may increase in wisdom all of your days. In short, continue to delight in these greatest of goods that you have inherited from the Lord.

In closing, I would like to leave you with the advice Peter gave to his friends in his second epistle:

Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God...through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue...Add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:2-9)

Amen.