

Commencement Address
Faulkner University
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Although I have heard more than a few commencement speeches, this is the first one I have given, and I greatly appreciate the invitation and the opportunity.

But in preparing these remarks, I struggled quite awhile about what to say. Should I talk about the exciting world of electrical engineering? Or perhaps about the exciting world of patent law? Or perhaps should I just give you some wise principles for life? You know, some of those Benjamin Franklin-like platitudes that are so popular this time of year: “Never eat more than you can lift.” “They can’t chase you if you don’t run.” “If the enemy is in range, so are you.”

None of those ideas seemed quite right. Can anything really be said in a commencement address that has not already been said many times before? After all, there are only so many ways one can say, “Go forth and conquer!”

So I struggled to find a topic worthy of the occasion. What should I choose? How should I decide? And with those questions, I found my topic – I decided to talk about decisions. So much in our lives depends on our choices and on our decisions. How do we make those choices? How should we make those choices?

You hear much today about freedom of choice. And it is true that God has given us free will. We have the power to choose. But, while we are free to choose our actions, we are not free to choose the consequences of our actions. A true mark of wisdom is the ability to anticipate those consequences. Our God-given right to choose is a God-given responsibility to choose wisely.

You often hear of the pathway of life, but for many there is no pathway but rather only a dark forest with countless paths leading in countless directions. In fact, at no time in history have we had more choices than we do today. And the more choices we have, the more difficult it is to make a decision. We can do what we want, where we want, and with whom we want – and at no point in your lives are you likely to have more choices than you do at this moment – where to live, where to work, whom to marry.

Some decisions are big and some are small, but at the time it is not always easy to tell which is which. Some decisions that seemed small may turn out to have been life-changing. That uncertainty makes it all the more important that we have some basis for making the decisions in our life.

And we have many bases from which to choose. We can decide to do what others are doing. We can decide to do what feels right or what feels good. We can decide to do nothing, but even that is a decision – and there are many today on that path. The world is full of people who just can't make up their mind about anything. Winston Churchill described such people as “decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, and adamant for drift.” For that drifting group, nothing is deliberate. Instead, life for them is simply a game of pinball in which they aimlessly bounce about until at last they miss the paddles and drop through the chute to end the game. They don't care what path they are on because they don't care where they are going.

In preparing these remarks, I came across a poem by Robert Frost that has long been a favorite of mine – “The Road Not Taken.” The poem is about making choices and it ends with the memorable line, “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.” And that line has no doubt been quoted in countless graduation exercises to tell countless graduates – *all dressed exactly alike* – that individuality is the key to success. But when you read the entire poem, what you discover is that it has a very different message.

The poem begins with a description of those two roads that diverged in a yellow wood – and what the poet tells us is that the two roads were about the same. If one was really less traveled, it was hardly noticeable as he stood there deciding which way to go. It is many years later (“ages and ages hence”) that he concludes one road must have been less traveled – and he does so with a sigh. There really was, he concludes, a basis for that decision made so long ago – that decision that seemingly made such a difference in his life. Surely the course of his life had not been determined by a random turn in the woods long ago – or had it? When you read the entire poem, what you see is not individualism, what you see is regret. After all, the title of the poem is not “The Less Traveled Road” but “The Road Not Taken.”

Yogi Berra said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!” And in your lives, you will come upon many forks in the road where you will be called upon to make a decision. Do I go left? Or right? Or perhaps just stand still wondering if I should go left or right? Or perhaps I should turn back? How can I know which way to go? You will ask such questions many times, and absent guidance you may like the poet one day find yourself wondering about those roads not taken and the seeming randomness of your life.

When we come to one of those forks in the road, how can we choose the correct path? What we need are road signs, and that is what I want to talk about today – three road signs that will help guide you on that road. Three guideposts that will help you find your way through that dark forest. Three choices that you will face, not once, but many times.

The first road sign presents us with a choice between truth and desire.

There are ultimately only two real philosophies of life – a philosophy that conforms desire to truth, and a philosophy that conforms truth to desire. As Christians, we know that desire must be in submission to truth. But the worldly reality is that truth and desire are almost always on a collision course. And what happens when that collision occurs? Do we conform our desires to the truth, or do we twist the truth to conform it to our desires?

This conflict is an ancient one. Think about Eve. She knew the truth, and yet she was standing before “a tree to be desired.” What to do? She ate the fruit, but she did more than that – she also believed the serpent and was deceived. When faced with a conflict between truth and desire, she chose desire, and she twisted her view of the truth to match that desire. How many times in history has her bad decision been repeated?

Jesus faced that choice in his first temptation in the wilderness. Paul was talking about that choice when he said that “those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” That verse describes the conflict between truth and desire, and it tells us the outcome of that conflict for those who belong to Christ. When you see truth and desire on that road sign, choose the way of truth. It may not be the pleasant way or the easy way, but it is the right way.

The second road sign presents us with a choice between one and many.

If I could leave you with only one piece of advice today, it would be this: Live a focused life in this unfocused world and you will succeed. Your focus is the laser beam that cuts through the fog of mediocrity engulfing this world.

When we look at those who have accomplished much, what we see is focus. We just spoke about the Apostle Paul, and he certainly understood the power of focus. He wrote, “but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” He had a goal, and he was focused on that goal. This one thing I do, he wrote. A Christian life is a focused life.

Indeed, a successful life in any area is a focused life. As a patent attorney, I have a special appreciation for one of this country’s greatest inventors, Thomas Edison. Over his career, Edison filed 1700 patents in the United States and 1200 foreign patents. In one year alone at the peak of his career he filed over 100 successful patent applications!

A reporter once camped outside Edison's laboratory for three weeks hoping to get an interview. When he finally met with Edison, he asked him the secret of his success. Edison said: "The secret to success is the ability to apply your physical and mental energies to one problem incessantly without growing weary. ... You do something all day long, don't you? Everyone does. If you get up at 7 AM and go to bed at 11 PM, you have put in 16 good hours, and it is certain with most men that they have been doing something all the time. The only trouble is that they do it about a great many things, and I do it about one. If they took the time in question and applied it in one direction, to one object, they would succeed." Edison understood the power of focus.

Focus is vital, and yet nothing is more difficult in this modern age of buzzing blackberries, blaring televisions, and endless distractions. Focus prevents us from being sidetracked by that; focus keeps us on track when pathways lead off in every direction; focus keeps us on the pathway toward our goal.

Spiritual focus is a primary theme in the book of James. It's not surprising that James (who grew up with Christ) would say so much about focus. He personally witnessed the focus of Christ.

James tells us, "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. ... purify your hearts, ye double minded." Notice that James links our purity of heart with our spiritual focus! Those who choose the many over the one are double minded, and those who are double minded are not pure of heart, James tells us.

But didn't Jesus tell us the same thing? "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." Blessed are those who focus on God, for they shall see him! The message is simple: We see what we focus on, and that brings us to our final road sign.

The third road sign presents us with a choice between the seen and the unseen.

We just talked about the power of focus. A natural question is where we should direct that focus. Focus by itself is not a virtue. You could be the most focused person in the world, but it would do you no good if you were focused on the wrong thing.

Upon what should we focus? God answers that question with a wonderful paradox – we should focus on what we cannot see!

We live in a secular world that rejects the unseen. Most people focus on the seen because they think that is all there is – and that is not just a modern phenomenon. Why was the rich fool in Luke 12 a fool? Because he focused only on what he could see. And why was Moses a pillar of faith, the evidence of things not seen? Because he looked to his unseen reward rather than to the treasures in Egypt.

Again, it is the Apostle Paul who perfectly frames the issue: “We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

Whenever I read that verse, I think of a very famous citizen of Alabama. Someone Winston Churchill once called “the greatest woman of our age.” I am speaking, of course, of Helen Keller. Here is what she said about that verse: “It gives me a deep comforting sense that ‘things seen are temporal and things unseen are eternal.’” She also said that “to be blind is bad, but worse is to have eyes and not see,” and that is true of so many. They have eyes but cannot see. Don’t be like them; choose the unseen; choose the permanent.

You are graduating today, and soon you will start off on new pathways and in new directions. It is an exciting time, and a frightening time. And at some point, you will look up and wonder where you are headed in your life. The answer to that question is simple – if you want to know where you are headed, look at the road you are on. No one who gets on Interstate 10 in Alabama and heads west should be surprised when they eventually get to Texas, and yet people often react with surprise when they reach the destination to which their decisions and choices have naturally led them. The key to reaching the right destination is to get on the right road and then to stay on the right road, and the people on that road choose truth over desire, choose one over many, and choose the unseen over the seen. They look for those road signs, and then they choose their path with deliberation and with wisdom.

We have looked today at three road signs – three choices that you will face time and time again, and in describing those choices I have spoken about a number of famous people. But, in closing I want to mention one other person – Elisha Hoffman. You may not recognize the name, but I’m sure you will recognize what he wrote. He lived between 1839 and 1929, and he wrote over 2000 Christian hymns, including “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” “Have You Been to Jesus,” and “Is Thy Heart Right with God.” He also wrote my favorite hymn, and it is with the words of that song that I will leave you here today. No better advice could be given on this day of your graduation or on any day than that found in this hymn:

“To Christ be loyal and be true; his banner be unfurled, and borne aloft till is secured the conquest of the world. To Christ be loyal and be true; he needs brave volunteers to stand against the powers of sin, moved not by frowns or fears. To Christ be loyal and be true; in noble service prove your faith and your fidelity, the fervor of your love. To Christ the Lord be true; For He will go with you, and help you all your conflicts through; To Christ the Lord be true!”

Congratulations, graduates! Go forth and conquer!