

Friends, family, guests, members of the Class of 1976, the faculty, staff, members of the Board of Trustees, and you, our graduates, it's an honor to share some thoughts with you as we draw this ceremony to a close. It's a privilege for me to be able to share some thoughts for you as graduates that I hope will speak to all of us regarding the way in which we live out our lives in faithful service to Jesus Christ in the world in which we find ourselves.

It is difficult not to be proud of you on a day like this, even more so when a graduating class in this day of self-indulgence, preoccupied with ease and comfort, chooses "It Is Well with My Soul" for their hymn.

It bears testimony to the work of God by his grace in your lives to shape you and to form you into men and women who will serve his son Jesus no matter what comes. So today I would like to share some parting thoughts with you from the passage that was read earlier in Paul's second letter to his student Timothy.

Before focusing on that passage in chapter 2 that was read, I want to set a little context for all of us as a reminder. When you arrived, we told you that if you were here wondering whether you were supposed to be here, you should put it out of your minds, that we echo with God's servant Job that his purposes cannot be thwarted. You were brought here by God's grace and for his purposes. I also said that not everyone who was there might be here at the end, so congratulations to you who made it to the end.

But God in his divine providence brought you here, sustained you, brought you to this place of completion. Whether you are finishing your undergraduate program, whether you added a master's degree, whether you studied here on campus, whether you were online, whether you made it through in 3 years, 4 years, 8 years, whether you were here and left and came back, or you came here knowing this is where you wanted to be when you were 12 years old, it doesn't matter. Wherever you came from in the world, whatever your background, whatever your experiences, whatever your family background, whatever your IQ, whatever your SAT score, whatever differences might be a part of this group that is assembled here today that we celebrate, there are common threads that we hold in common. That bind us together and that we share as we look to what is next from commencement, the beginning of the next step in your life.

I think this is the beautiful thing about the church. Whether someone who is raised in a Christian home comes to faith in Jesus, or someone who, like the Apostle Paul, was a persecutor of the faithful, a murderer of Christians, comes to faith in Jesus, we all stand before God equal as sinners in, the need of salvation and equal recipients of equal measures of his saving grace. There are no differentiations between us based upon our conditions or our experiences or our backgrounds or our levels of talent. There's an axiom in higher education developed by social engineering theorist some decades ago that dozens of college presidents have recited in graduations across the country for many years. That the world distributes talent equally.

It does not. It's a lie. It's a lie. 'Cause I couldn't slam a basketball into a hoop on my best day.

I can't read music. Some of you can't read music.

Some of you struggle with math. Some of you have photographic memories. Some of you read well. Some of you are terrified by it. Some of you like school.

Some of you hate school. For some of you, the social experience here has been the most exciting thing, and for others, it's been a hurricane of fear and anxiety. We are wired differently by God's design. We do not share and possess the same levels of talent or the same kinds of talents. What does equal the field is that we stand equal before the eyes of God as human beings made in his image and likeness, all judged according to the same standard, all saved by the same blood of Jesus, all called to live life the same way in faithful service and expenditure of all that we have given, whatever it is, for his good and for his glory.

That's the thing that binds us together. That's the commonality that we share. The Apostle Paul writes to his student Timothy in this second letter, the passage that was read earlier, that I would like to draw a few thoughts from for you this morning as you contemplate what is next for you, wherever you are in life, whether you're a 20-year-old whiz kid who finished in 2 and a half years or you've come back to finish your degree 20 years after you graduated from high school. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if you're in this room holding 3 degrees or never finished grade school.

This passage speaks to all of us because the Apostle Paul is delivering eternal truth that is to guide the way all of us should live and serve. I'm often struck by what must have been great rapidity in the Apostle Paul's mind because in this passage he draws 3 different word pictures. And mashes them together in a way that makes them very profound and impactful. He says to Timothy in chapter 2, "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him." I would say to you today, as you commence, as you are here hearing these words and think about your life, Beyond this ceremony, we are called to be soldiers of the Lord.

That is, we are to remember our mission, to stay focused, to endure the hardships of one who has been called to do battle for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the glory of God. The Christian life was never, never put forth as a promise for ease and comfort. The disciples who are called in those very first interactions with Jesus Most, most faced hardship and tribulation and martyrdom. The Christian life, though, is a call to faithful service as a soldier in the ranks of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the Apostle Paul tells his young student, "Share in sufferings as a good soldier of Christ.

Don't become entangled in outside pursuits, civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him." And my first encouragement to you and to all of us is to stay focused, to remember the mission, that we serve the Lord Jesus Christ. Though that will not be easy, that is what we have been enlisted to do. In a world that is incredibly preoccupied with personal convenience and personal achievement and self-indulgence, this is a clarion call to the Christian to set all of that aside and keep your eyes on the one who called you to himself. No matter what, the Apostle Paul tells Timothy, be a good soldier, stay focused on the mission, remember the one whom you serve.

Secondly, the Apostle Paul says to him that "an athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules." He adds to this collection of word pictures the athlete We're blessed with an outstanding athletic program here, wonderful facilities, great student athletes who not only participate in athletics for their own good, but they contribute to the life of the university.

We are all familiar with the role that athletics plays in contemporary culture. The Apostle Paul in his day is actually calling to mind a picture of one who is disciplined, and who is constantly given the opportunities to advance themselves by cheating, by breaking the rules, by bending the rules, by stepping outside of the lines. The Apostle Paul tells his young student before he sends him off into his own autonomous and independent service, "Remember to be an athlete who is crowned because he competes according to the rules." In this day and age, more than any in my lifetime, There is a very clear, very clear imperative for us as Christians to maintain our integrity in a world that says it doesn't matter whether you do or don't. All that matters is the crown. For the Christian, what matters is the way in which you achieve it.

So my exhortation to you is to remember not only to be a good soldier focused on the mission, but to be one who disciplines themselves in competition and holds to the rules, maintains their integrity even when the tide and the current around you pushes you in the other direction. Hold fast to these core commitments and live your life as one who will maintain their integrity no matter what happens around them, no matter what the dangling prize in the front of them is. We hold to these standards, the highest standards of integrity.

Finally, the Apostle Paul says it's the hardworking farmer who ought to have the first share of crops. Be a good soldier, remember your mission, stay focused on it, serve the one who enlisted you. Compete as an athlete who is achieving great things by the rules. Hold your integrity. And then finally, remember it is the hardworking farmer who ought to have the first share of crops.

You must commit yourself today to work hard for the rest of your days because that's what God expects of you. The Apostle Paul says to his students, "This hardworking farmer ought to have the first share of the crops, holding forth an example of discipline and diligence, of hard work, of husbandry and stewardship." It is taking what you've been given and using it to accomplish the Master's purposes for His glory. In that passage in Matthew 25 where Jesus gives us the parable of the talents, not every servant is given the same thing. They are not even held accountable for their returns. What they are held accountable for is what they did with what they were given.

The world will lie to you and tell you that you've all been given equal talent, and when you lay your head down at night, you will know that is not true. We are not equal in terms of talent. We do not have the same skill set. What we can do is all that we can with what we have been given.

The concept of the farmer is one that is really powerful in this passage, because it doesn't just call to mind getting up early, before the chickens, and doing the work. There is an element of stewardship in the agrarian life that is required. You have to care for the soil, for your livestock, for your family. You have to adjust to the weather. You have to care for your equipment.

You have to keep your tools sharp. Remember in Proverbs, Solomon says, "I walked past the field of the sluggard, and behold, I watched. The wall had broken down, and the thorns had grown up, and the thistles had overtaken the field, and it became useless. And I said to myself, 'Look and learn. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands, and failure and poverty come upon you like a thief in the night.

Brothers and sisters, graduates, you have been entrusted with some great things by the grace of God, including your time here. Be good stewards of it. Tend to it well. Serve as a good farmer who works hard and cares for what he has been given.

The interesting thing here is that the Apostle Paul ends saying, "Think over what I say," and I think that's a good thing to do. In verse 8, "Remember Jesus Christ risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel." The temptation would be to think that these three word pictures, the exhortation that Paul gives to his student Timothy to live life this way as a brave and faithful soldier committed to the mission that he's been called to, serving the one who enlisted him, to be an athlete who competes with all their strengths and abilities according to the rules, holding their integrity, working hard with good stewardship and faithfulness as a farmer who enjoys his first crops. It would be tempting to think, "That's what I must do to have earned my redemption." And that would be a lie.

These are not the things you do to earn your redemption. You cannot earn it. These are the things you do because you have been redeemed.

What we have taught you and poured into you, from the faculty members who stand in front of you to the staff members who serve you in practical ways and behind the scenes, what we have done in praying for you, in all the programs across all the modalities, what we have wanted to see is you become the kinds of people who think rightly about God, yourselves, and the world in which you live. Who will choose to live life in a way that brings him glory. To do that, you must remember that you are bought with a precious price. We do not all come from the same place. We do not all have the same opportunities, the same skill levels, the same IQ levels, the same interests.

What we do have as Christians who have placed saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are the same blessings, the immeasurable blessings of forgiveness and redemption and the promise of eternal life with the Lord Jesus.

Let that shift your perspective from yourself to something greater: the mission of your Commander who has called you to himself and enlisted you in his ranks; the integrity that your faith demands of you to play according to the rules so that no one—no one—can bring reproach upon you; and a diligence and faithfulness to steward what you've been given to advance the Master's purposes. Let

that grow out of what has been given to you that you could not earn, and rejoice in that.

It's our continued prayer for you that you would think this way and live your life this way. You know, uh, today we have the Golden Grads with us from the class of 1976. When they graduated from college 50 years ago, America was celebrating its bicentennial. You're graduating this year as we celebrate our semi-quincentennial. It's worth noting that your word is harder to say than their word.

And we sit here this morning in the shadow of the founding city of this nation.

One of our early presidents, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe. The fifth president, James Monroe, said the question to ask at the end of each step in educational journeys is not simply what has a student learned or come to know, but what has the student become? When you live life this way, according to these words, in the eternal, absolutely true word of God, That's the measure of our success, that you will actually become faithful servants, soldiers, and farmers in the fields of the Lord, working hard to advance his purposes and bring him glory. We hope and pray that what you do beyond these walls will do just that. We love you.

We are proud of you. We celebrate this achievement with you. By God's grace and for his glory. Well done.