

COMMITMENT AND CONTENTMENT

Matthew 16:25

Baccalaureate Sermon
Mount Vernon Nazarene College
May 23, 1993
Dr. E. LeBron Fairbanks, president

Introduction

Many of the graduating seniors here tonight began their studies at MVNC in the fall of 1989. Anne, Stephen, and I moved to Mount Vernon in the fall of 1989. It is appropriate to say that we have walked through these four years together. I have seen you grow and mature; hopefully, you have seen me develop and improve.

Perhaps it is because of this personal relationship with the class of '93 that, in my last sermon to you as MVNC seniors, I want to return to my first sermon I preached to you. The date was September 13, 1989. The location was . . . you guessed it -- the M.P.B. (Remember those days?) Anne, Stephen, and I had moved into the president's home, but we really were living out of the six suitcases we brought with us from Manila.

The sermon was titled, "Commitment and Contentment." It really wasn't a sermon in the truest sense, but a glimpse of my own spiritual pilgrimage and a little of my background. Because the sermon reflects the basic principles on which my life is based, I want to share these thoughts with you again so that the last words you hear from me as your college president, not just the first words, reflect convictions on which I urge each of you to stake your life.

My father was an alcoholic, and I did not have a happy home life. In fact, it was quite miserable. I remember saying to myself as a teenager, "My life is going to be different, and my family is going to be different." I don't really think I knew what I meant by the statement; except I meant it. It was at the Florida District camp--a summer church

camp--in June of 1959, between my junior and senior years in high school that I became a Christian . . . I knew my sins were forgiven, that I had invited Jesus Christ into my life. I really wanted to live the Christian life.

I remember going back to my high school friend in Northwest Miami, Florida, and saying to him, "...some things are going to be different; I really want to be a Christian." He and I remained friends during those last few months of my senior year; but I remember his words in the yearbook. He said, "I've appreciated our friendship and enjoyed running around with you"; "but," he continued, "as for your future, I just don't know." As for your future, I just don't know . . ." I will never forget those words.

Actually, the senior year of my high school days was rather traumatic for me. In the fall of 1959, I was in the hospital. I had an illness that was diagnosed as leukemia. I really didn't realize the extent of my illness until I received a phone call from an out of state friend one night when I was in the hospital. My friend said to me, "I wanted to talk to you before you died." I think I can safely say that was my most restless night of my hospital experience. I quizzed my parents and those closest to me. They said it was true, that my illness had been diagnosed as leukemia and that the end was near.

A group of church people from the Nazarene church in Hialeah, Florida, came to my hospital room during that time, and they told me they had been to the church and had knelt at the altar. They had poured oil on a handkerchief, they prayed, and came to the hospital room and placed that handkerchief on me. They prayed a prayer of faith and asked God to touch and heal me. I surely wanted to believe that God healed me!

It was within a few weeks that I did begin to improve. A few weeks later, to everyone's surprise, including the doctor's, I was able to go home. In several months, I was able to go back to school and was able to graduate.

And God did touch me. I have lived my life since those days with the belief that God had spared me for a purpose; and, in some way that I don't fully understand, I do believe that His hand was placed upon me, and I do believe that my days are special. I do not take them for granted. I do not take them lightly; and I believe I am here by the hand of the Lord.

I wanted to go to a Nazarene college; but, like most of you, I did not have much money to go to college. Because of my father's lack of work, lack of initiative, and perhaps lack of care for his family, I worked almost every evening, sometimes until midnight, in a local grocery store to bring money into the home for food. So, I really didn't have much money; and I didn't have good grades.

During the summer of 1960, my relatives invited me to Chattanooga, Tennessee, as a kind of graduation gift. I accepted their invitation. When I arrived in Chattanooga, the pastor of the Nazarene church asked me if I would speak in church for two Sundays so he could go to General Assembly. I was happy to speak to the congregation. I didn't realize that the pastor had left \$50 with the Sunday School Superintendent with instructions to, "See if you can raise some pledges from the congregation, to be paid over the next three months, so that LeBron can get into Trevecca Nazarene College. At least try to pay his first quarter's tuition." I remember the amount was \$300, a little different now; but that was a big amount! The little church pledged \$300 to come in over the next three months, and I was able to go to school that fall. During the first week I was in Nashville, I was able to get a job off campus. From that point on, that church was never able to support me again or help me; but I was able to stay in school and was able to pay my bills.

Something significant happened to me on January 17, 1962. I remember the date. It was revival service on our campus. I remember the speaker. I remember the singer who was singing . . . a good friend of mine even today. In some way, the service got to

me. I remember going to my room that night. I made a little altar out of a box. I really believe that I was sanctified through and through that night. I came to the point of saying to God, "If I am going to be a Christian, I want to be the best Christian I can. I don't want to play games. I don't want to go halfway. Here's my life."

A passage came to me that night that has truly been my life verse. You will find the verse in Matthew 16:25: *"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will find it."*

In June 1962, I married Anne James, a TNC student from Gainesville, Georgia, and we've been married now for 30 plus years.

In June of 1964, I graduated from Trevecca Nazarene College. I secured work in a local Nazarene church in Nashville while I continued a master's program at a United Methodist graduate college across town. In 1967, upon completion of the master's program, I went to our headquarters in Kansas City as an editor in the Department of Church Schools and continued my seminary program.

In 1970, I wanted to continue my studies and resigned the job at headquarters and accepted an invitation to attend Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey.

In 1971, I began my pastoral ministry and continued my doctoral studies. I went to Europe in 1978 to work at European Nazarene Bible College and, in 1984, moved to Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. Approximately five years later, I accepted the invitation to lead Mount Vernon Nazarene College.

I look back upon my few years of experience, and I think I've learned a few things about saying, "Yes, Lord." One of the things that I've learned is that saying, "Yes, Lord," is really a once-for-all response with daily implications. I said it and I meant it for all

eternity in 1962, but I've had to come back and say it again as new issues have come across my path.

Every decision, however, has been pursued from the point of view of God's will. I've not always known God's will . . . I have not always known God's way; but the answer was already made once I discerned His will and His way. It would be, "Yes, Lord."

Another discovery about God's way is that it is much more beautiful than any way I could have mapped out by myself. I could never have planned my life the way it has unfolded.

I remember writing a career book in the ninth grade about being an airplane mechanic. That was the direction I was going and could have enjoyed it, I'm sure; but, when I really began to allow God to lead and guide and I began to be responsive to His promptings in my life, His paths have led me in ways that I could not even conceive when I said that simple, if not naive, "Yes, Lord"; but I tell you, my life since that time has been filled with meaning, with purpose, with fulfillment, with significance, with direction, with value. My life has had a profound sense of meaning.

I am rich in things that count. I can look to people into whom I've invested my life. I look to people in Europe, in the United States, and in Asia and really feel that I'm rich in eternal investments.

Dr. Victor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist was held prisoner by the Nazis for several years. In prison camp he was stripped of his dignity, clothes, personal belonging and all material wealth.

But, in his book, Man's Search for Meaning, he describes the loss of all but one belonging. "They could not take from me," he said, "my attitude I would choose to accept toward what they were doing to me." Circumstances around you in life may rob you of

those things which people around you deem important. But, if your life is invested in people, who will live on eternally and not invested in the temporal, material possessions, your life will be filled with meaning and significance.

If you lose your life for Christ and the gospel, you will find that sense of purpose and meaning in life that riches, position and power could never provide. Frankl said it a different way. He believed that man's search for meaning is the fundamental human motivation in life.

I've invested my life in ministry development--ministers of the gospel and clergy, and in students who seek to understand what it means to be Christian in the context of the workplace. I've given myself to this high calling, and in it is tremendous meaning and purpose.

I received a letter recently from a former student of mine who is pastoring a large church near Frankfurt, Germany; and one from a close friend of mine in South Africa with whom I've worked very closely. I also received a letter from an Indian student at APNTS. I am not in any of those places, but part of me is, in those people. And I have received letters from some of you. What a great investment! I wouldn't exchange it for anything.

I've also come to understand that "Yes, Lord" does not mean that we have to become cross-cultural missionaries and go around the world. I think some people feel that, if they really give their hearts to the Lord and really give up their right to chart their own course, the only way to prove their commitment is to go around the world; but that is not true. God may be calling you to go around the corner, or to go around the block, or to a nearby city, maybe to become actively involved in this community; and, in your obedience, you will experience the same dimension of meaning and purpose as I have experienced.

"Yes, Lord" may involve making a trip to a cultural context that is different from your own in order for you to appreciate people different from yourself.

I remember one of my students at Southern Nazarene University who joined me at Manila for six months in 1985 as a volunteer. That six months extended to three and one-half years. He sang a song in his final chapel service at the Seminary. The song is titled, "Satisfied." It's a simple song with a very simple theme. The theme is, "I'm satisfied." I don't want anything different from what I have in Christ today."

My salary at MVNC is more than I've ever made. The house is bigger than any I've ever lived in; and I have things now that would probably identify me as being in plenty. I tell you, however, it's not always been like this. I really understand what it means to be in want. I've lived on a missionary's salary. I've asked God to give me the same contentment at Mount Vernon Nazarene College as I experienced in less affluent times, and not to let the setting make a difference in who I am and the perspective I have in life.

My dad, who was an alcoholic, really became a Christian on his death bed, and I'm glad he did; but what a tragedy, to lose his life for nothing and to waste his life and die basically with very little. I'm glad he became a Christian on his death bed, but how different my life became when I really trusted Christ and gave up the right as a seventeen-year-old to chart my own course. How much more challenging, how much more fulfilling, how much more meaningful my life has been.

As for my high school friend, . . . I just don't know. I hope he became a Christian. He was a brilliant student, and I'm sure he has earned much more money than I have during the 43 years since our high school graduation.

But this I know. As a Christian, I have experienced far more meaning, purpose, significance, and fulfillment than he or I ever dreamed possible. And God is not finished

with me yet. I am still on the journey. God continues to unfold His plan and will for my life.

I desire for you that you can come to the point of radical trust, so you can experience freedom from the tyranny of possessions; freedom from the feeling that you've got to give direction and meaning to your own life or it will not come; freedom to relax in Him and to really understand in full measure what it means to be satisfied in Him.

I desire that you embrace as your life verse the passage which has been so foundational to me: *"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."*

Filipino Christians are beautiful people. I'll always love them, and I'll go back to visit them. They have a song they sing, and they sing it with joy even after typhoons. They are beautiful as they sing the little chorus:

I'll say "Yes, Lord, yes," to your will and to Your way,
I'll say "Yes, Lord, yes," I will trust You and obey.
When the Spirit speaks to me, with my whole heart I'll agree,
And my answer will be "Yes, Lord, yes."

I deeply desire for me and for you that, increasingly, these words will be more than just a chorus, but a reality, a conviction, an anchor, the frame of reference in our lives.

May it be so, Lord. May it be so, especially for each student in the class of 1993, as he/she leaves MVNC, with a crystal-clear affirmation, "I Believe . . . I Believe."
Amen!