

WILL YOU BE ANY DIFFERENT?

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President Phipps, faculty colleagues, graduates, family and friends.

I want to say thank you very much, Messiah College, for the honorary degree you have just given to me. I am deeply grateful. I think the core of who I am and what I have tried to do in my life flows out of the Brethren in Christ denomination that founded Messiah College.

I could not help thinking as I received the degree about a conversation I had with Messiah College's fourth president, C. N. Hostetter, Jr., a long time ago in 1958. Back then, Messiah's president also did a lot of admissions work, looking for prospective students; and President Hostetter was in Ontario recruiting students. We talked, and I explained that I had decided to go to a college in Ontario. Pres. Hostetter urged me to change my mind. He said: "Ron, you can make a mistake once, but after that you are stupid." Well, stupid or not, I did not decide to attend Messiah College back then. But I am delighted that today I finally have a Messiah College degree. And I'd like to think that C. N. Hostetter, Jr., who is one of my heroes, is looking down and is also pleased.

Graduates, my talk this morning is called: "Will You Be Any Different?"

Whenever I think carefully about Christian faith, I am utterly amazed. Modern science continues to disclose the breathtaking vastness and astonishing complexity of our 14-billion-year-old universe with its one hundred billion galaxies each with its own billions of stars. Christian faith tells us that at the center of this incredible universe is an infinite loving Person who is both Creator and Redeemer. Even more astounding, this loving Creator of the galaxies became flesh as an embryo, a growing baby in the womb of an illiterate virgin living in an oppressed colony at the edge of the powerful, pagan Roman empire on a tiny planet in a small solar system in just one galaxy among the universe's one hundred billion galaxies.

This baby became a carpenter, then a wandering Jewish teacher, explaining that the God of the universe cared so much about the evil ways we mistreat and destroy our neighbors that he came to live among us both to show us how to love our neighbors and also to give us the power to do it. He taught us that the God of the universe is awesome holiness as well as overflowing love and therefore we selfish, sinful persons would have no hope of standing in the presence of the Living God except for one thing—God loves us so much that Jesus takes our sin upon himself and dies in our place so that we can stand unafraid in the presence of Infinite Holiness.

What makes all this even more astounding is that this wandering Jewish teacher not only taught an amazing message, he also made blasphemous claims. The very center of Jewish belief in Jesus' time was that there is only one God. Greek and Roman polytheists believed that gods and goddesses ran around doing strange things but the Jews knew better. God is one. There is only one God. But the Nazarene Carpenter claimed to have divine authority to forgive sins. At his trial he acknowledged he was the Son of God. When Thomas met the risen Jesus, Thomas uttered the amazing words: "My Lord and my God." This man from Nazareth, the early Christians taught, was also true God, Creator of the galaxies, King of kings and Lord of lords. His bursting from the tomb on the third day, they believed, provided convincing evidence that all his teaching and claims were true.

But Jesus did even more than offer unmerited forgiveness of sins and reveal that he was God in the flesh. He said the long expected Messianic kingdom promised by the prophets of old was actually breaking into history in his person and work. He said the eagerly awaited time of peace and justice was arriving. He taught his disciples to care for the poor, minister to the sick, and love their enemies.

Jesus also challenged the status quo in many ways—the greed of the rich, the neglect and mistreatment of lepers, women, the poor and disabled. And Jesus promised that the same Almighty God who raised him from the dead would live in his disciples through the Holy Spirit to give them the inner power to live and love the way he did.

Equally astounding, Jesus' earliest disciples taught that God's ultimate plan, at the Second Coming, was to overcome all evil, wickedness and injustice and restore to wholeness everything in creation that sin had messed up. They believed that Jesus' ever growing circle of disciples should and can live now in the knowledge that the decisive victory over evil has already been won and that at Christ's Second Coming, the victory will be completed. In the meantime, you and I are to find meaning and joy as we take our tiny place in this grand cosmic drama. As we share the story of this glorious salvation inviting others to confess and follow Christ and as we live like Jesus even now in the midst of a broken world, each one of us plays a tiny but important role in God's grand cosmic drama. As the community of Jesus' disciples truly lives like Jesus, we offer a skeptical, hurting world a little picture of what heaven will be like, a little picture of what the redeemed earth will look like when Christ returns.

I find this story—this true account of God's action in history—utterly dumbfounding. That the Creator of one hundred billion galaxies became flesh on our tiny planet; that our awesomely holy God loves you and me and every other human being so much that God himself gladly suffers the hell of Roman crucifixion for me, for you so that whosoever will may be saved; that each one of us is personally invited by the Infinite Lover at the center of the universe not only to live forever in his presence but even to play a small part now in moving society toward that peace, justice and wholeness that Christ will perfect at his Second Coming; all that is simply mind-boggling.

I can only bow down in worship and praise.

That, my young friends, is the utterly fantastic Good News that I wanted to review this morning. I say review because that in brief is a central part of what you have learned in your four years at Messiah College.

But there is also bad news. What tears my heart out is that so many of the people who claim to embrace this glorious story act as if they do not believe a word of it.

The Christian church is supposed to be a little visible picture of what heaven will be like. Instead, so many Christians live just like the world.

So many Christians mimic the world rather than follow Jesus. So many Christians commit adultery, worship money, file for divorce, hate their enemies, embrace idolatrous nationalism, and destroy God's creation just like their unbelieving neighbors.

If there was time—and there is not—I could cite reams of polling data and other statistics to underline what I mean.

For now, just a couple sad statistics. Polls show that evangelical Christians who claim to have the Risen Lord living in their hearts get divorced at the same rate as the rest of society. In some polls, evangelicals are even more racist than other Americans. One study of a prominent, wonderful evangelical denomination discovered that physical and sexual abuse was just as common in that church as in the rest of society. The Christians living in this country, the richest nation in history, give only about one-fourth of a tithe (2.6% of their income) to their churches. If we would just tithe, U.S. Christians could give another \$160 billion a year

to the work of the kingdom. That \$160 billion is more money than all the rich nations of the world give every year to fight poverty and disease in developing countries.

Graduates, in all honesty, I have to say: So many of my generation and your parents' generation of Christians are lukewarm, half-hearted Christians who often have lived more like their sinful neighbors than like Jesus. So I ask you a basic question: Will you be any different? Will you follow Jesus rather than the world?

The awesome God I described stands with arms outstretched pleading with you to live like Jesus. But he will not coerce you. If you want to go to church on Sunday and then worship sex, money, power, and short-term personal self-fulfillment the rest of the week like so many Christians today, God will let you do that although it breaks his heart.

But there is a better way. You can decide to live differently from today's lukewarm Christians who mouth Christian words and then mimic the world. You can decide that no matter what the cost, you will live like Jesus. If you do, you will be surprised by joy as God uses you to transform this hurting world.

My friends, small groups of daring pioneers have regularly changed history. Let me remind you of three examples.

About 250 years ago, William Wilberforce was living a self-centered sinful life as a member of the wealthy British gentry. Then he met Christ in the Wesleyan revival and God transformed his life. For about thirty years he worked tirelessly as a member of the British parliament to persuade his nation that slavery was a sin against God and neighbor. It was a hard sell because slavery and the slave trade were major pillars of the British economy. But Wilberforce combined prayer and a passion for evangelism with brilliant political strategy and eventually persuaded the British parliament to abolish first the slave trade and then slavery itself. This daring evangelical politician changed the course of British history.

Or consider the Student Volunteer Movement. At a conference for university students led by Dwight L. Moody in 1886, a call to evangelize the world in their generation captured the imagination of hundreds of students. Over the next few decades 25,000 university students became foreign missionaries, tripling the number of Protestant missionaries around the world. The Student Volunteer Movement is one important reason why the number of Christians has grown by leaps and bounds in Africa, Asia and Latin America in the last one hundred years—transforming the economics, politics and culture of the planet. A few tens of thousands of committed evangelical university graduates truly changed the world.

Finally, let me tell you about my good friend Wayne Gordon. Wayne grew up in a Christian home in the mid-west. He had perfect Sunday school attendance for several years but had never personally committed his life to Christ. Then during an Athletes for Christ weekend, when he was in Grade Ten, Wayne did that. That Sunday night after returning home, he lay on his bed filled with a new sense of joy. Wayne looked through the ceiling and declared: "Lord, I'll do anything you want me to do with my life."

Almost immediately, he felt a call to the inner city. So Wayne woke up his parents, told them of God's call, and said he must go. Good Christian parents that they were, they said: That's fine, but you should probably finish high school. Wayne did that—in fact, he graduated from Wheaton College—and then moved into the Lawndale section of Western Chicago, one of the twenty poorest neighborhoods in the country at that time.

When Wayne moved into Lawndale, the infant mortality rate there approached the levels of very poor countries. Very few students graduated from the failing high schools. It was tough sledding at first. The night Wayne returned from his honeymoon, somebody broke into their apartment—and it happened ten more times in the next two years.

Wayne started a Bible club and a recreation club for the youth and they started to accept Christ. Wayne saw they needed tutoring so he started a tutoring program. He saw they needed health care so he started a medical center. Today the medical center has about thirty full-time doctors and ministers to tens of thousands of people every year. The state-of-the-art tutoring program has helped over two hundred youth graduate from college. Wayne's community center has built millions of dollars of low-income housing. The community center is now a \$15 million a year program transforming a whole neighborhood in Chicago.

At the center of all this work is a church of a thousand people—most of whom have come to faith in Christ through the work of the community center. Wayne—and all the staff he hires—know that people need more than just good health care or job training although they certainly do need those things. People need Jesus and a job. Thousands of people have come to faith in Christ through the work of Wayne's holistic community center.

All of that started because one young man looked into the face of God and said: "Lord, I'll do anything you want me to do with my life." The result was a life lived in a dramatically different way from that of today's half-hearted Christians.

My young friends, I ask you: Will you be any different from today's lukewarm Christians? Will you make empowering poor people more important than making money? Will you keep your marriage vows even in the hard times? Will you plead at least with the Christians in this hyper-nationalistic country to obey Jesus' command to love our enemies? Will you be business leaders who reject greed? Political leaders who oppose corruption?

The world is waiting for a generation of faithful Christians who would truly live like Jesus.

Our God promises, if you surrender your whole being to him, to give you the power of the Risen Lord to keep your marriage vows and live joyful life-long marriages so full of contagious goodness that your neighbors will long to know your Lord. Our God promises to help you give generously, even sacrificially, of your time and money to empower the poor. Our God promises to give you the vision and commitment to restore respect for human life, battle disease, work for peace and care for creation. The Lord longs to see a new generation of young leaders who will dedicate their lives to sharing the glorious Gospel of Jesus with those who have never heard.

There are enough people graduating from Messiah College this morning to transform significant parts of our world in powerful ways. But it all depends on each of your answer to the question: Will you be any different from today's half-hearted Christians?

The Lord stands with arms wide open inviting you to a life of joyful costly discipleship. He asks you to surrender every corner of your lives, every hope, every ambition to Him.

I beg you, look into his face and promise: I will be different. I will live like you. My Lord, if you give me the strength, I'll do anything you want me to do with my life.