

GRADUATION

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 24, 1959 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

This is the time of the year when there are a great many young people who are looking forward to graduation. That also means that a great many families are centering their thoughts on the graduation of one or more of the members of that family. Some will be graduated shortly from elementary school, some from high school, some from college, and some from professional schools, such as schools of nursing and schools of medicine. It appears to me that this is an appropriate time to think about that word graduation and some of the rich meanings behind it.

This is a time when we can pause to be thankful for the wonderful educational system in this land of ours. We can be grateful for the many fine schools across the continent, grateful for the many thousands of people who have a part in running these schools and for all those who have had a part in making this the finest educational system in the world. With all their faults, our schools are still wonderful when you think of how many hundreds of thousands of children are enrolled in them each year, and the progress these young people make toward being fine, mature people, well qualified to carry on the life of a great nation.

We ought to be grateful, too, for those who laid the foundation for our universal, free educational system. This was a concept that was relatively new back in the days when our forefathers adopted it. I think I am right in saying that there was no other country on earth at that time that had the idea that every child ought to have an opportunity for a free education. We are grateful that elementary and high school education are now almost universal in this great, vast country of ours.

Worthy Achievements

This is also a time when we can pause to be thankful for the achievements of our own young people who are ready to be graduated. When you pause to think of what goes into the making of a high school senior, it is rather impressive. From that day when the young person timidly walks off to attend the first grade on through twelve years until finally he walks down the aisle to receive his diploma there has been an almost endless procession of difficult tasks to be done. I think back to some of the teachers that I had in those early years. I will be eternally grateful to the one who taught me how to read. She opened to me worlds of information and enjoyment. Someone along the line taught me how to add and multiply and divide. Someone along the line also introduced me to the realms of geography, history, science, and many others. Your experiences, no doubt, have been parallel to mine. Our educational system is a wonderful thing, so to the many of this congregation who will be graduated from medical school, or college, or high school or the eighth grade we all want to express our congratulations and our deep admiration for jobs well done.

This seems also an appropriate time to look behind the word graduation, at some still deeper meanings. Let us compare what graduation means with some of the elements that are necessary for successful lives. When I think of graduation I think not so much of the caps and gowns, not so much of the immediate celebration, and not so much of the congratulations. I strip it of all these immediate things and think of it primarily in terms of three things. The first of these three things is a worthy goal. Many years before the moment of graduation somebody began to do an important work. Twelve years before high school graduation he took up the responsibility of going to first grade, then to second grade and on through until finally twelve years later he is a graduate from high school. It has been an important work in the pursuit of a worthy goal. The second thing, after choosing a worthy goal, is diligent work. Think of all the papers that had to be written; think of all the efforts to be on time; think of all the tests that were taken. There is a great deal of diligent work. Finally, after a worthy goal and after diligent work, there comes a satisfying reward.

Life--Purposes

These three things are also present in every successful life. If a life is to mean anything that is very important it must be aimed at a worthy goal. One of the great passages of the New Testament that bears reading and rereading is found in Paul's letter to the Philippians, where he says, "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:12-14). Behind Paul's life there was always the remembrance that he was dedicated to a purpose, dedicated to a goal. The great achievements of the apostle's life were largely a result of having chosen his goal so wisely.

I remember also an earlier passage in the New Testament where Joseph, the husband-to-be of Mary, was concerned when he found that she was with child. An angel came to him and said, "Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she shall bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus; (and the next few words state the purpose of Christ's coming) for it is he that shall save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:20-21). Everything that Christ ever did was a step toward the accomplishment of his purpose. Wherever he went, whatever he said, all was directed toward the goal for which he had come to earth. That is where a successful life begins.

We have many decisions to make: what kind of job we will take, what part of the world we will live in, whom we will marry, and other such matters. All these decisions need to have the foundation of a great life beneath them. I pity the man who has no purpose in life, who just drifts along. His decisions are made willy-nilly by chance. He finds out after a while that they are inconsistent and point in all directions. How happy is the man who has early in life chosen a worthy destination for with that in mind he can make all the other decisions. Christ was that way; Paul was that way, and if we are Christians we are that way.

### Six Suggestions

I spent a little time recently setting down some of the things that need to be considered when we choose a life goal. I came out with a list of six, which I hope will be helpful. The first is this: Our life-goal should be selected carefully and thoughtfully and not be a result of aimless drifting. One of the weaknesses of most people is that apparently many major decisions are not really made, they happen by default. The job a boy takes, the place he lives, the girl he marries--all these may be determined by chance associations. Our goals need to be chosen consciously. Not very long ago two seniors in high school made an appointment to come by and talk with me about the future of their lives. They had already made the decision of whether they were going to college or not, and even where they were going, but they wanted still to talk with someone who was older and more experienced, someone who could help them think through the future of their lives. That is the kind of thing I mean. Our lives need to have consciously selected goals, rather than those aimlessly arrived at by drifting.

The second suggestion is that our goal should be possible of achievement. I have seen people whose goals were so unrealistic that after a little while it was obvious that they could not achieve them. As a result life became pretty largely a resentment because of failure. Maladjustment and frustration resulted. Our goals need to be within the capabilities that God has given us.

The third suggestion is that our goal should challenge the best that is in us. For a five-talent man to choose a one-talent goal means failure, no matter how well he may do that one-talent work. For a man with great abilities to waste those abilities on something less than he is capable of achieving is failure no matter what he may achieve in his work.

Suggestion number four is this: Our goal should involve service to mankind. I cannot conceive of a man being very happy over the long span of a life whose life does not render service to his fellowmen, and hence service to God. Any kind of occupation, it seems to me, ought to have some kind of benefit that it renders to the people who use that service or buy the product. Whatever it is that we spend our life's blood in doing, it ought to mean something good for our fellowmen.

Here is number five: Our goal should be something God approves. By that we simply mean something that is honest, that has high motives and that is consistent with Christian principles.

Last of all, our goal should have eternal significance. How tragic it is for a man to pursue a goal that vanishes when he dies, yet millions and millions of people throughout the world are spending themselves for something that will not reach beyond this earth. There are many people who seem to have as their central motive in life the gratification of physical desires, so eating, drinking, travel, recreation, and sex are the main things they think about, talk about, and work for. When life ends at death that is all finished. On and infinitely higher level are those who spend their lives specializing in the study of some part of our universe. They produce notebooks, learned treatises and vast amounts of knowledge, for their efforts, too, are bound up with time and with the finitude of earth. Any purpose that is really worthy of a life ought to have some value when this beginning of existence on the earth is finished.

Our goals should have eternal significance. That is why I cannot think of a person choosing a life purpose apart from Christianity. Apart from Christ and his ethics, ideals, and way of life there is no real meaning to existence. If he is to choose his life purpose wisely, the graduate must choose it in the framework of Christianity.

### Work

Life, if it is to be successful, must have purpose, but that alone is not enough. It must also have hard work. I know a man who has unusual ability and who has right goals, but who is something of a disappointment and failure. Why? Because he has never really worked. The laziness of his life has washed out the achievements that his ability and his goals promised. Remember Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 9:10, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might." Remember also the words in John 9:4 where Jesus said, "We must work the works of him that sent me, for the night cometh when no man can work." These words impel us and prod us on to activity. The night is coming when we cannot work. In Romans 12 there is an eleventh verse which says, "In diligence not slothful, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord." In Matthew 25:26; at the end of the parable of the talents the man who had one talent is described as a "wicked and slothful servant." His sin was that he did nothing.

When there are high purposes and goals for life, and when there are evidences of real work, then there comes the third element that we see in graduation--a meaningful reward. In graduation from school it is a reward given by school authorities, by parents, and by friends. It is a reward of congratulations with good will and esteem. The endorsement of one's family and friends is a very great reward. No man lives a happy life that does not have it, yet that pales into insignificance when compared with the reward that we get

when we choose Christian goals and work to achieve them. After a while we are taken home to spend eternity with God in heaven. Paul said in II Timothy 4:7-8, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith, henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but also to all them that have loved his appearing." When we have chosen a Christian goal in life and when we have pursued it with diligence, then there comes the great reward of a heavenly home with God.

#### Commencement

Commencement at the time of graduation is a time when we leave the preparation period of life and move out into the enjoyment of real life. I like to think of death for a Christian as a time of graduation. The Christian has served his apprenticeship here on the earth and now he graduates to a more wonderful world for eternity. But, you know no one ever graduates who does not enroll. In order to graduate into heaven you must enroll in the greatest school there is--Christ's church. As we close this study, the opportunity for you to enroll is given. Come, believe on the Lord, repent of your sins, confess his name before men, be baptized and then live with him until he calls you home.