



HERITAGE
CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

“Being Real & True To Yourself”

Commencement Address to the Class of 2014

by Dr. Ray Reynolds (5-10-14)

Friends and faculty... I want to begin by saying... it is an honor to be with you today. 14 years ago I was setting in these seats... excited to finally be finished... but also a little nervous about my future. You should be proud of yourself and all that you have accomplished. You should feel honored to have a degree from Heritage Christian University. This is an amazing institution... filled with some the greatest people on earth...

I have many fond memories when I think of this university (IBC). Memories of professors like Dr. Steven Guy, Dr. Coy Roper, Dr. Bill Bagents, and brother Wayne Kilpatrick among many others that helped to train me. I have memories of countless students who shared a classroom with me... Many of them I consider my dearest friends.

During my graduate studies here, we were part of history in the making... the first class of alumni through the Master's program in 2001. I can honestly say... it was one of the most enjoyable experiences I've ever had in my life.

It has also been a pleasure for me to work with Heritage Christian University in another great endeavor. In fact... in 64 days and about five hours... we will have another graduation ceremony in this building... for around 70 teenagers... from nearly a dozen different states. They will be receiving certificates from TITUS Camp after eight days of training for ministry. Our staff, including many alumni, enjoy the best week of the summer... with the crème de la crème... of young leaders of the church. It is a great program!

I love TITUS Camp... and I love Heritage Christian University. So when I accepted this invitation I immediately started thinking about what I could share with you today. For years you heard great professors... pillars of faith... men and women of God... preparing you for work in the kingdom. You've memorized the great commission. You've learned apologetics, hermeneutics... and could probably do biblical exegesis in your sleep. So that would be considered “old hat” on a day like today.

So I prayed about it... And I decided to share something I learned within these walls... Something that has had a profound impact on me, my spiritual walk with God, and my ministry... Something that was said to me by several of the instructors over the years... both during my undergraduate and graduate studies... Something that you might not hear in other universities... or places of higher learning... Something that has defined who I am and how I approach my everyday life...

It started when I visited this campus in 1995. Early on in recruiting... I can't remember who said it first... It may have been Jim Collins or Buddy Baker or someone else... But someone said to me, "At IBC we don't force-feed you. We don't judge you based on whether you are liberal or conservative. We train you think for yourself."

Over the years I heard that same statement echoed by several professors... "We want to train you to think for yourself... so you can become an effective communicator of the gospel." That was more than a statement about doing your own work... or forming your own opinions... It was an attitude that prevailed here... We were encouraged to do more than just think for ourselves... we were encouraged to BE ourselves... to be genuine... to be real... to remain unique and true to ourselves... because that translates into REAL ministry!

I don't know if that "be real and true to yourself" attitude saturated this environment because we had so many international students... When you entered the campus you saw flags from every nation represented by the students attending here. And our goal was not change them, but to train them... Maybe that was it.

I don't know if that "be real and true to yourself" mindset came from a manual or a fundamental workbook that was passed out to the faculty and staff... I doubt that's the case.

I don't know if that "be real and true to yourself" mentality became a life statement because we had so many unique people at International Bible College and now Heritage Christian University. Maybe our professors tried to find a nice way of saying... We're all weird... so let's just be weird together! That's probably not it either...

No... I truly believe the main reason why this idea was set forth to students was because the thought of being trained to think for yourselves... The idea of being genuine and true to yourself... Was a fundamental teaching of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And these men and women that have taught us at HCU have not only instructed us in the **will** of God and the **word** of God... They live as great Christian examples in the **way** of God! They don't just teach us the way... they walk in it... as spirit filled disciples of Christ. I wasn't impressed by their accolades in academia, or their diplomas, but by their spirit! They walked with Jesus! AND when you walk with Jesus... you begin to understand the fundamentals of ministry. You learn ministry from the Master Teacher. One of the basic tenants of Jesus' ministry was genuineness... We see that even in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), early on in Jesus' ministry.

I think about how Jesus expresses kingdom living in that sermon.... Genuine godly living... How he condemned hypocrisy... and how it must've offended Him to witness man-made traditions and religious politics overshadowing the true message of God... to save the world from sin. If the religious elite had only been true to themselves... and learned to think for themselves... the road would've been less difficult for John the Baptizer and the early Christians. No one wanted to be real! They wanted to put on a mask. They wanted to play the part... and religion became entertainment... a soap opera.

I think about how Jesus had such a strange assortment of men He called apostles... each of them were genuine and unique. They were diverse by their social class, profession, and heritage... Looking back we know that Jesus did this so that one day that diversity might bring unity among men... as they are ushered in the true kingdom of God! God longed for a kingdom that was multicultural... one that was non-judgmental... free from discrimination regarding age, race, sex, or spiritual baggage.

The Sermon on the Mount is a very familiar passage to us... But maybe we can look at it with a fresh pair of eyes today... how Jesus is trying to tell His disciples **why** they needed to be genuine and real... Jesus said...

³ *Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted.*

⁵ *Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.*

⁶ *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.*

In these verses Jesus is reminding us to be true to ourselves... why? Because your faith is at stake and your reputation is at stake. Don't pretend to be someone you aren't... don't lie to yourself. You know your spiritual condition. You know what you hunger and thirst for... Jesus goes on by saying...

⁷ *Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy.*

⁸ *Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.*

⁹ *Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.*

In these verses Jesus is reminding us to be true to others... why? Because God's reputation is at stake. If you and I do not learn to be personable... If we neglect to preach the truth in love... We are not just hurting ourselves... We are hurting the image of God. Anyone can represent God in name and speech, but unfortunately many are not doing it well! Kingdom people should be merciful, pure, peaceful... Not harsh, negative, hateful, and divisive... Those are descriptions that should be equated to the world, not the church.

I'll never forget something brother Jones told us in our Interpersonal Communication class... "Anyone can communicate... But we are called to be effective communicators the gospel!" YOU SEE, anyone can speak... but we are called to speak the truth in love.

But... hold up... Jesus is not done.... It's not just about our image... or the image of God, something else is at stake here... Jesus goes on to say...

¹⁰ *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Jesus gently commands us to be true to our enemies... why? Because their eternity is at stake. I wish I could tell you that when you receive this diploma... all of your problems will be solved! I wish I could say the brethren would treat you with respect and that you have everything you need to be successful in ministry. But the truth is... if you go out into this world and do the things you been trained to do... the world will hate you... and even some of your brethren will turn against you.

But Jesus says... Don't let that persecution stop you! They persecuted Jesus. And they persecuted the prophets. And they have persecuted Christians since God established the church. Nothing is going to change that. So Jesus says... Don't focus on those things... Focus on your reward.

Don't try to be politically correct. Don't try to sway with the winds of change. Don't become a judge or take vengeance on those who seek to harm you. Don't take up your sword to fight your brethren when they attack you. You just stand firm! And remember that you work for the Lord and not for men! He sees you beneath it all. And He loves you. He wants you involved in His work. He wants you to get comfortable with your story and He wants you to tell your story. As we read the book of Acts we see Paul retelling his story... over and over again. Because his story is unique... So is yours.

When we realize that God's story is our story... and our story God's story... we will engage in REAL ministry. We will be witnesses of Christ's work, we will be living epistles... AND then, like the early Christians we might just turn this world upside down... But even if that doesn't happen we will turn our own lives upside down... We'll turn our congregations upside down.

Brennan Manning is quoted for saying: "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians, who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable." God forbid if those "Christians" are ministers.

The cry of a lost and dying world is not for more churches... it's not for more benevolence or charitable organizations.... they are not crying out for more religious institutions... in fact, they don't need more ministers! What they do need... what they are starving for... is for genuine Christianity. They need you... to be you. And they need you to lead!

You'll never be a Dr. Bagents, Barrier, Burluson, Gallagher, Snodgrass, Daily, Goldman, Kilpatrick, McKinnon, Jackson, or anyone else who has trained you over the past few years. You may mimic their style... or use their material... but you need to be yourself. Let God use you in His own special way. So don't let "selected" and "anonymous" write your bulletin articles each week. Don't let Chuck Swindoll, Adrian Rogers, Mark Copeland OR dad write your sermons for you. Put your heart into your work... and let the people see you! Get out among the people. Visit the sick. Get involved in your community. Be Jesus to them. Be a friend to sinners. That's what the world needs!

Brother Basil Overton used to say, “The best thing about what we do is we don’t know what we’re doing.” And that’s true... if we are doing it right! Just being true to ourselves. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes on to say it in a very simple way... You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... You are a city on a hill...

When you made a commitment to come Heritage Christian University... you did not come here for a degree in nursing, political science, or phys ed... though they are great fields... You came here to be equipped for ministry. And you’ve completed that task! Where you go from here is up to you... maybe you are headed to the mission field... or to graduate studies... or to a local work... maybe you will be bi-vocational in ministry... it doesn’t matter as long as you stay true to yourself and become what God wants you to be...

We’ve lost some greats from this distinguished institution over the years. I want to close with quotes from two of those great men. One was Mark Wilz, a student I attended classes with... he passed away just a few months after graduation from cancer. He had already lost a leg when he was a student here... and was struggling with his health... we asked him, “Why did you sign up?” And he said... because “I didn’t see men with two good legs signing up!” AMEN!

The other quote, and I leave you with this one is from the late Charles Coil. When he was interviewed about becoming the first president of IBC... he humbly said, “I accepted” because “no one else would take the job.” Aren’t we glad he did?

You came here... you signed up... you put in the time... you took the job... So, when you leave here... do something amazing... be yourself... and give God the glory!