

Two Modern Parables

(Address to the Graduates of Pillar of Fire Schools, 1996)

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“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.” (Proverbs 4:7)

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.” (Prov. 9:10)

“It is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart. For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.” (1 Cor. 1:19-20, RSV)

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.” (Col. 3:16)

This is a commencement address. It is not a Sunday morning sermon, nor a baccalaureate speech, but if it sounds like either of these, then perhaps it is because I have been thinking along such lines. You are familiar with the term “parable.” Our Lord frequently used parables, as we know. Someone has described a parable as “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Usually they are fictitious, although some Bible scholars state that some of the parables of Christ related to actual people and events.

Recently I came across a letter and a book. The letter had just arrived, and was the current newsletter of Dr. James Dobson, of Focus on the Family. He gave a remarkable, and almost unbelievable, account of a 17-year-old girl who had taken two difficult tests, and had not made a single mistake on either. One was a test some of you graduates may have taken recently. It was the Scholastic Achievement Test. She scored, we understand, a perfect 800 on each section. The other was a difficult test called the University of California acceptance test. In this she scored a perfect 8,000. No one has ever before done what this 17-year-old girl, Karen Cheng, has done.

Although Karen is a straight A student at a San Jose high school, she says that she is a “typical teenager.” She goes on to say that she “munches on junk food and talks for hours on the telephone with her friends.” She also says she is a procrastinator “who doesn’t do her homework until the last minute.” That doesn’t sound very good, does it?

Karen’s teachers, however, speak of her “unquenchable thirst for knowledge and her uncanny ability to retain what she reads.” She says she “wants to be a lawyer and then a judge.” Already she “has been accepted for admission to Harvard University.” It is no wonder, is it? Many colleges and universities would be happy to have her on campus.

A reporter asked this amazing young woman, “What is the meaning of life?” Could you guess what her answer was? This is it. Listen carefully. “I have no idea. I would like to know myself.”

Dr. Dobson’s publisher brought together groups of young people around the country to see what their major needs and stress points were. Although many of these young people professed to be Christians, “the most common characteristic to emerge was the absence of meaning in life.” Isn’t that tragic? You who have attended a Christian school, should know something about the meaning of life, and I trust that you do. You should know that God has given each of us an important work to do for Him in the world, in the salvation of precious souls, and the elevation of mankind. Unfortunately, there is little or nothing about this to be found in the typical public school of today.

Recently a book of fiction came to my attention that was published before some of your parents, or even grandparents, were born, in 1929, some 67 years ago. That was some time before World War II, as you students of history know. The story began--and ended--with the thought of purchasing an automobile. You might ask, “What is so unusual about the buying of an automobile?” It’s done every day by someone, even by teen agers.

For years a business man had struggled and struggled to make money, and he had done pretty well at it. He was very generous to his wife and children. His oldest daughter was a senior just about to

graduate from high school, and her brother was just a little younger. Then there was a younger daughter, and still a younger daughter and son. The family had a lovely home, and the children went to the best of schools, but now the father was thinking of building a new and larger home, for he was about to sign a contract that would bring in more money, lots of money.

It was almost Christmas, and he was thinking of buying his oldest daughter a new car. He had been looking over the different models in the show room. In fact, he almost missed his train back to the suburbs. Would he buy her the yellow one? No, that was too flashy. The blue model was very handsome, but perhaps the deep green would be best.

Then, on the commuter train, as he was glancing at the evening paper he had picked up at the station out of habit, he overheard two high school lads not far in front of him in their noisy conversation concerning their conquests. He didn't pay much attention to their loud talk, that is, until he heard one of the boys mention his oldest daughter's name. Instantly he was alert, and what he heard mortified and sickened him. Should he throttle these high school boys? That one, at least?

When he got home his eyes began to open concerning his children. His oldest daughter, whom he had petted and coddled, had become disrespectful and irreligious. His oldest son had begun to gamble. Both had begun to smoke.

What kind of father was this man, to bring up his children in this way? He had been brought up by a godly mother. He had gone to church. He had been generous in his giving to charitable causes. He had even been elected as an elder in his stylish and wealthy congregation. What had gone wrong?

Little by little he realized that his children had imbibed the deadly attitudes of the popular culture of their schools and their well-to-do friends. There was no right or wrong. After all, according to their teachers, evolution accounted for the presence of man on the earth. There was no God. That was all the superstitious residue of previous generations.

What could he do about the situation? He decided on drastic action: he would pack up the

family and take them to the old family farm in Vermont where he had been brought up. There was no electricity or running water there, and it was miles from any large town, but maybe some change could be brought about in his children's attitudes and actions, and even in his own and his wife's.

In the old farmhouse he found his mother's well-worn Bible, a book he had neglected for a long time, and decided to have family devotions, something he had not even thought of for years. As you may surmise, gradually things changed for the better.

There were some unexpected events, and a tragic accident, but the family began to draw together, and God began to play an important role in their lives. When, months later, they moved back home, expecting to return each summer, the father and some of his friends were planning to found a Christian school in their old neighborhood, so that their own and other children would have the opportunity for a Christian education.

Oh, and yes, there's something else. Once again Dad was thinking of purchasing an automobile for his oldest daughter. She had seen the error of her ways, through a series of events, and a long time of illness, and was now interested in things eternal.

Life has meaning, and it is imperative that we seek for it and find it. There is only one sure source: God's Word, the Bible. I pray and trust that you have already found that meaning, and that you are diligently following up on what God's will is for you. Nothing is more important for you, and for us all, now and in the future.