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Appointed to His Service — The Gospel as the Foundation for Christian Ministry



Friday, December 9, 2011

Certain events require ceremony, and graduation is one of these events. In an institution like Southern Seminary, commencements seem to come with astonishing velocity. The school is 152 years old, and this is its 208th commencement ceremony. It marks my 37th opportunity to preside at this ceremony, and by the time students graduate from Southern Seminary, they are old hands at receiving diplomas and degrees.

Yet, at the same time, this experience never grows stale. Something too important is happening here, and happening once again. This is not just a gathering of graduates who are about to be recognized for their achievement. It is a final opportunity to gather an assembly of pastors, missionaries, ministers, and servants of the church as they are ready to go out to the ends of the earth.



The formality of the occasion marks this as a part of our academic heritage. These graduates join a long line of those who have received the blessings of education and learning and are now to be recognized for their achievement by the awarding of degrees. The faculty and guests gathered here testify to the worthiness of these graduates and their new stewardship of knowledge. Anyone familiar with higher education would recognize almost everything that will take place here today, right down to the details of the ceremony and the patterns of the regalia.

But, then again, they could miss the whole point. That outside observer would assume that we are now setting these graduates loose to make their mark in the world, to make their profession proud, and to earn the respect of the age. That is what most schools do at this level of higher education, but that is not what we are about. This commencement is not about something less than those aims, but something far greater. We are here because we believe that God is soon to bring glory to his name through the Gospel service of these ministers who will graduate today.

Consider with me the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 1:12-17:

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. [English Standard Version]

This puts what we are doing today into an entirely new context. How did these graduates arrive at this moment? Each would have his or her own story, but in this text the Holy Spirit gives us the account of the Apostle Paul. In truth, this is not only his story, however, it is the story of every God-called minister of Jesus Christ.

Paul gives thanks to God for his calling, his ministry. He serves, as he says, by divine appointment. His strength for the task and his appointment for service were given him by Christ Jesus our Lord, who judged him faithful.

But Paul fully understands that there is nothing in him that commends him for this appointment. Furthermore, he acknowledges that he is, as he says elsewhere, the least likely of all to receive such a divine appointment. Why? Just look at the apostle's words — he was formerly a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent of Christ and his church.

Stronger words could hardly be imagined. He confesses that he was the enemy of Christ. He had committed blasphemy, denying that Christ is the promised Messiah. He persecuted the followers of Christ, putting them to death. And he arrogantly set himself as the enemy of Christ himself.

In other words, there is no human logic that can explain how such a man would be appointed to Gospel service. How could Christ's enemy become his apostle to the Gentiles? Paul explains that it is all a great demonstration of the infinite redeeming mercy of God in Christ. The grace of God overflowed for me, he says to Timothy, with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

We dare not miss what Paul is saying here. He is telling Timothy that he has been called into the ministry by grace — by the sheer unmerited favor of God. The one who was God's enemy is called to be his faithful servant.

The dramatic contrast in Paul's life sets the stage for our understanding. We remember Paul as Saul, holding the cloaks of those who murdered Stephen for his faith and for his testimony to Christ. We remember Paul as Saul ravaging the church of Christ, scattering the believers and chasing them even into foreign territories, arresting, persecuting, and hating the followers of Christ, and thus Christ himself.

But we also know Paul as the surrendered sinner on the road to Damascus, arrested by grace as he went to arrest the followers of Christ. We know him as the great Apostle to the Gentiles who takes the Gospel throughout much of the known world and sends it ever onward. We know Paul the loving pastor who suffers willingly for the church, the courageous defender of the faith who stares down its enemies, the intrepid missionary for the cause of the Gospel, the joyful preacher of the cross of Christ.

How do we explain this? Before looking to Paul's own explanation, let us ponder this: Even though this is the testimony of the Apostle Paul, it is also the testimony of every one of these graduates. They, too, were once the enemies of Christ. They, too, once hated the very things they now love. Like Paul, they have received their call to the ministry by the sheer grace of God, his unmerited and extravagant favor. Their rebellion may have been less conspicuous, but it was no less real. Their transformation may have been less famous, but it was no less spectacular.

These graduates are not now to be set loose because we recognize today their worthiness. No, we openly declare their unworthiness in and of themselves — even armed with their newly minted degrees. They have been called to this service by God and it is he who has made them worthy by the gift of his grace.

How are we to understand this? Paul's answer is simple — just remember the Gospel.

“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of all acceptance,” Paul says, “that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”

Behind the call to ministry is the salvation of a sinner, the vanquishing of Christ’s enemy, the life-transforming power of God’s grace. The Gospel is itself the foundation of the Christian ministry, and Paul wants Timothy to understand this clearly.

Christ came into the world to save sinners! The confluence of this commencement with the majesty and glory of Christmas only serves to remind us of the centrality of the incarnation of Christ to the Gospel, and of the purpose of his coming to save.

The most trustworthy statement that we will ever know is that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That, above all other declarations, deserves full acceptance. This is far more than the reason for the season, it is the only reason for our hope. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth,” declared John (John 1:14). “While we were still sinners, Christ dies for us” (Romans 5:8).

The babe of Bethlehem is none other than the Savior of the World. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

These graduates know themselves as Paul knew himself. They know themselves to be sinners who desperately needed the salvation that is found in Christ and in Christ alone. They knew of their need for the forgiveness of their sins, and they found that forgiveness in the cross and resurrection of Christ. They know that they did not and do not deserve this gift of salvation, but they declare that this free gift comes to all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and look to him for salvation, rescue, redemption, and peace.

They would know no greater joy this day than that anyone here who does not know this salvation that comes through Christ would come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior today — right now. They, like the Apostle Paul, now stake their lives on these truths.

In the same way, they, like Paul, know that the ministry they have received is just as much a demonstration of God’s grace and unmerited favor.

With Paul, as he continues to teach us in this passage, they know that they have received mercy in order that in themselves and in their ministries “Christ might display his perfect patience as an example of those who were to believe in him for eternal life.”

Christ called them, at least in part, so that the world would wonder why — so that the

only answer to that question is the matchless grace of God. In every believer, the perfect patience of Christ is demonstrated, but in the life and calling of the minister, it is demonstrated all over again.

That is why I say that far more is going on here than the world would understand. This is not merely a commencement. This is a gathering for the declaration of God's determination to save sinners who come to know and to trust Jesus Christ for their salvation. This is the rendezvous of transformed sinners called into the ministry of Christ by grace, now ready for deployment.

They have achieved much during their seminary studies. They have received a theological education and ministry preparation of the first order. They have finished this course and they have reached the end of this season. They will never sit together in a single room on earth again. We have come to love them and to cherish them, and now we put a diploma in their hands and show them the door.

Who is worthy even to witness such a thing? Not one of us. And yet, Christ has mercifully allowed us to be witnesses of these things.

What do we say to this? What *can* we say to this? The Holy Spirit gives us the words through the Apostle Paul:

To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

This message will be delivered at the 208th commencement of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky by its President, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., on Friday, December 9, 2011 at 10:00 a.m.. You may view the entire ceremony live by streaming video by going to www.sbts.edu.

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