

Commencement Address
Dallas Baptist University
December 19, 2008

Thank you Dr. Cook for that kind introduction. *Greetings* to all my DBU colleagues, and let me offer congratulations to the December 2008 graduating class of Dallas Baptist University. And I also extend a warm welcome to all who have come (some from great distances) to share with us in this special day of celebration and commencement.

Today, I would like to speak with you about *the pursuit of happiness*. In the December 2006 Christmas movie season, a very popular film was released with the title "The Pursuit of HappYness," HappYness, intentionally misspelled with a 'Y.'

Will Smith stars in this moving, rags-to-riches film inspired by the true story of Chris Gardner, a San Francisco salesman struggling to build a future for himself and his 5 year old son, Christopher, played in the movie by Will Smith's real-life son, Jaden. When the mother walks out, Chris is left to raise Christopher on his own and he turns, unsuccessfully, to hawking portable *bone density scanners*.

But Chris is determined, and his determination finally pays off when he lands an unpaid internship in a highly competitive stock-broker training program, where only one in twenty interns will get a permanent job. Without a salary and too many *unsold bone density scanners* on his hands, Chris and his son are evicted from their apartment, and forced to sleep on the streets, in homeless shelters, in metro station bathrooms, wherever they can find refuge for the night. In the end, however, Chris is the intern who gets the prestigious job. Later on, he starts his own brokerage firm, a portion of which he eventually sells for a multi-million dollar profit, and becomes a Wall Street legend.

In this story, Chris was seemingly quite successful in his pursuit of happiness, getting the good job, making the money, providing for his son, and fulfilling his dreams, despite all the odds and obstacles.

The pursuit of happiness — this is quite a phrase. Graduates, may I ask you: why did you come to college? What motivated you to get a university degree? May I suggest that, whether you realized it or not, you came to college to get a degree, at least in part, in pursuit of your own happiness. Your assumption has been that a college degree was a passport to a happy, or at least, happier life.

Chances are high that you were pursuing happiness *even before you started college*; more than likely, you also sought to be happy *while you have been here at the university*; and as I have said, you have probably assumed that a university degree will result in a happier life *in days ahead*.

Now I certainly don't think there is anything wrong with this. Indeed, I would say that there is something quite right about it. In fact, I would even suggest that God created us to be this way. He made us to be the kinds of creatures who seek genuine happiness, to discover what it means to find fulfillment and to flourish in every aspect of our lives.

This is not just my personal opinion, but a biblical point of view based on the story of creation found in Genesis 1-2. In these two chapters we discover that God created a beautiful world, designed specifically for us and for our well-being. It's called paradise for a purpose.

In the beginning, we discover there were at least six ingredients that made up God's recipe for authentic happiness as he ordained it: God himself first and foremost, then everything else under him including work, people, food, rest, play, and a delightful place (you will recall it was called "Eden"). It was "a [an original] state made perfect by the combination of all good things" (Boethius).

This is *not* a "hedonistic," but a biblical, "edenistic" happiness rooted in God the Creator and his creation. The Hebrews called it "*shalom*" — peace, soundness, wholeness, well-being, and blessing.

But then the unthinkable happened. We sinned and threw it all away. The Bible moves from the story of creation in Genesis 1-2 to the account of the fall of

humanity into sin in Genesis 3. This narrative about our rebellion against God explains the reason for the tragic, heart-breaking character of the human condition. Because of our rebellion against God, our lives and this world are no longer the way they are supposed to be. *Shalom* has been vandalized. The peace has been drastically disturbed.

Though some may dismiss Genesis 3 as an inconsequential myth, we must take its message seriously. What happened in Eden may be hard to understand, but it makes everything else understandable (Peter Kreeft).

What this story helps us to understand is our devastating brokenness. As a parable about humanity, the famous nursery rhyme “Humpty Dumpty,” fragile egg that he was, illustrates our shattered condition and inability to fix ourselves.

Humpty Dumpty [humanity] sat on a wall (at creation)
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall (into sin);
All the kings horses and all the kings men (the best of human effort)
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

In the fall of humanity into sin, we lost our God-given happiness. But when we fell and lost that happiness, we did not, in any way, shape, or form, lose our love or our longing to be happy. As one truth telling bumper sticker puts it, we are all “In Search of the Eternal Buzz.” In fact, we have been very busy looking for life and liberty, and have been in diligent pursuit of happiness ever since. As singer/song writer Kate Campbell asks in a new song,

What's it gonna' take to save the day,
What are you gonna' need to feel o.k.?
If you close your eyes, what would you pray?
What's it gonna' take to save the day?

But in trying to save the day, indeed, our day, this is where we often go wrong ... terribly wrong. In our desperate search to find something that fulfills and satisfies, in our strenuous pursuit of happiness, we attach our loves, affections, and desires to a variety of people, places or things we think will make us happy. Is it him? Is it her? Is it this? Is it that? Is it here? Is it there? Is it now? Is it then?

To be sure, problems don't arise because we need or love people, places or things or because of the people, places or things themselves that we love and

need. Problems do arise, however, when we leave God out of the picture and seek our happiness in created things, but without the creator. But people, places or things on their own are just not able to deliver the lasting happiness we seek.

They promise it, but they break their promises every time. Created things minus the creator simply just aren't happiness worthy. In our misguided pursuit of happiness, then, we love things *unintelligently, excessively, and unrealistically*, that is, in the manner of disordered love. And disordered love leads to all sorts of disorders in our lives — idolatries, vices, habits, addictions, even violence, crime and warfare. And we wind up bent and broken, sad and unhappy, empty and frustrated, agitated and restless, yet once again.

But perhaps there is nothing better than to recognize the total failure of our pursuit of happiness in this world, on our own, without God. In the band Switchfoot's musical imagination, multiple disappointments are actually blessings in disguise since they amount to a "beautiful letdown," and force us to consider an option that may not have been on our radar before.

It was a beautiful let down
When I crashed and burned
When I found myself alone unknown and hurt
It was a beautiful let down
The day I knew
That all the riches this world had to offer me would never do.

What we discover, however, is that Jesus Christ will do, especially as the biblical story moves forward from creation and the fall to redemption. Jesus Christ is the God-Man, and through his life, ministry, words and deeds, death and resurrection, He defeated the enemies of sin, death and Satan that had frustrated God's purposes of life and peace, meaning and purpose, and genuine happiness for people and this planet. As a result, Jesus is Savior and Lord, and He can be our Lord and Savior, if by His grace we place wholehearted trust in Him.

Now we shouldn't forget that Jesus first occupation was that of a carpenter. So if you will allow me just a little bit of metaphorical room, we must

understand that when we believe in him, Jesus as carpenter is radically rebuilding the houses of our lives.

He's not just doing a little bit of remodeling here and there. Rather, it's a total renovation — an extreme makeover, Christ's edition. He's not just changing you into a decent little cottage; He is building you into a palace, one in which He intends to live. As we read in Ephesians 2: 10, "we are his workmanship!" In transforming us into an abode in which He Himself will reside, Christ's main work is to reorder our loves and our lives in significant ways!

First of all, Christ teaches us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, as the first greatest commandment requires. Then with God as our first love, Christ also teaches us how to love ourselves, our neighbors, and, indeed, the whole creation and all it contains in the right way, as the second greatest commandment demands. When we love God first, then everything else God created for us to enjoy originally at creation is not eliminated, but put in its proper, second place in our lives.

American idol contestant, and Rockwall, Texas, resident *Jason Castro* figured this out by God's grace, and as he says in a video at the I AM SECOND dot Com website (perhaps you have seen the campaign advertised on area billboards): "My name is Jason Castro, and I am second." Or as C. S. Lewis puts it, "You can't get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first."

What thing is really first, and which things are second, where these belong in our lives, and how we should love them well in God is really what you should learn about in college, especially at a Christian college. And if you haven't learned this lesson yet, now is the time to learn it.

Sad to say, I am afraid this is exactly the lesson Chris Gardner in the movie "Pursuit of HappYness" failed to learn; this is where he actually made his biggest mistake. No doubt it was a wonderful thing for Gardner to get the good job, make the money, provide for his son, fulfill his dreams, and so on.

But is this all there is? No, this is NOT all there is!

Graduates, since this is the case, as the last lesson of your last lecture, please remember, if God is NOT first in your life and behind all you are doing, then at the end of the day, your loves and lives will be disordered, and you will be unhappy, since whatever you are doing will ultimately be vain and futile — vanity of vanities, futility of futilities, just as the book of Ecclesiastes has pointed out for centuries. On the other hand, please know that if God is first in your life and if he is behind all you are doing, then at the end of the day, your loves and lives will be rightly ordered, you will understand true meaning and purpose, and you will experience the deep meaning of happiness that God has intended you to enjoy since creation.

Therefore, let God who is love and life reorder your loves and your lives; Let Jesus Christ the carpenter renovate your house. Be willing to say: “I am second.”

Again, graduates, congratulations on your educational achievements. May God bless you and keep you, make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you, and give you His shalom, His peace.

Thank you.