

## GOD'S VISION FOR US

Chapel Service  
September 5, 2002

John 3:1-21  
II Peter 3:11-12  
II Peter 1:3-10  
Acts 27:25

### INTRODUCTION

1. Welcome back to campus. Especially the 340 freshmen and 60 transfer students. To all of you I extend warm Christian greetings.
2. I wish I could spend at least 30 minutes with every one of you.
  - a. I'm fascinated with your stories ...
    - 1) about your families,
    - 2) your faith,
    - 3) how you heard about MVNU, and
    - 4) the miracles that occurred in each of your lives to bring you to this institution
  - b. I'm strengthening my faith and my work when I hear your stories.
  - c. Thank you, Dr. Gary, for bringing Dr. Tom Lytle to campus yesterday for him to share his story with us.
3. This summer, I received an e-mail from Jason Greene, a recent graduate.
  - a. In the letter he shared part of his story with me.
  - b. It's a part of his story I did not know.
  - c. Listen to his words. He gave me permission to share it with you.
  - d. It is a story of how God did "a new thing" in him.
  - e. Jason tells us how God is beginning to shape a Christ-like character in him.

Letter from alum:

Dr. Fairbanks,

I doubt that you will remember me, but I just wanted to drop you a quick email. I graduated a couple of years ago and had several conversations with you about Theater and New York City, where I will finally move to so I can pursue a career in acting and writing. I never told you while

I was a student at MVNC, but you were someone who I looked up to and considered to be a good Christian man. You spoke several times in Chapel of your upbringing and the type of Father that you had. It sounded like we had similar childhood's. I too had an abusive Father who took out his daily frustrations of life out on his children. Your speaking about your Father helped me to realize that the cycle does not have to repeat itself like many of the studies show. I believe all people that have childhood's like that have moments of weakness, in which a certain emotion can come back to haunt us, but for the most part, through God and others, we realize that the repetition of the acts can stop. It was my greatest fear that I someday would participate in the same acts of my father. I have married a wonderful woman, she was the daughter of Pastor Walter Brandenburg who used to preach at the Foursquare Gospel Church. She is a great Christian and has helped me realize that I must forgive my father for his actions in order to move. I have forgiven my father, I don't like him. I have forgiven him.

I also wanted to tell you another way that were "Jesus" to me. While I attended MVNC, I was not your typical Nazarene student. I enjoyed drinking, smoking, and other immoral acts that are against the Christian faith. Most of the people I came across at the college looked down upon me, because they knew that I participated in these acts. I was friends with other people like me, others that smoked and drank with me. During all that time, I could tell you had a genuine love for the students like me, and that was greatly appreciated. I wish I would have told you while I was still attending college, but everyone has those people in their lives that they look back upon and see them as instrumental people in their current walk with God. One of my biggest regrets in college is that I did not participate in more acts of service in the various activities that the college participates in. I wish I could do it all over again, but I can only start from this point on.

The reason I wanted to go to Mt. Vernon was because I grew up with Reggie Hetsler and Jerrod Gardner. The three of us were best friends. They were Nazarene and I was Baptist. I did not want to go to college after high school, and they went off to the Naz. After the accident and Jerrod died, I signed to go to the Naz just because I wanted to be there for my best friend Reggie, for he was going through a rough time. It seems like I should have known the errors of alcohol then, but I still ignored the signs and stories, and became maybe the biggest drinker the Naz has ever seen. I even bartended my way through college and became friends with many people in the community.

After graduation I moved to Columbus, where I continued to bartend at some clubs and worked during the day. One night after bartending, I had a freak stroke. I was rushed to the hospital, and it looked like I could die. I could not move my mouth or think properly, but I knew that I had treated Jesus improperly. My girlfriend who later became my wife was constantly working on me to listen to my heart, and this experience gave us both opportunities to grow more together and towards the Lord. I laid in the hospital for 8 days unable to move the left side of my body, and my mind seemed to work in slow motion. There were times I just wanted to die. After being released, I had a lot of therapy to go through. It was during all of this that I realized, Jason, you have got to get yourself straight and listen to what God wants with your life. And miraculously, I can move both sides of my body, and I am strong and healthy. No stroke related symptoms bother me anymore.

Cara, my wife, and I got married last October, and I have never been closer to God. Now at the end of this month, Cara and I will be moving to New York City, where I will pursue acting and writing, and my wife will go to law school. Two places that are in desperate need of Christ. I

look forward to the challenge now of fulfilling my duties for Christ, I just wish I would have done them sooner.

I guess I wanted to write this email for encouragement to you. I know it must be hard at times to see kids struggling with their Christian walk, but the only thing you can do for them is pray and continue to be an example. One of the biggest problems that I faced in college was constantly being judged, and I never felt that directed from you. Thank you Dr. Fairbanks for being an instrumental teacher in my Christian walk, even though you did not know it at the time. God Bless you, the campus, faculty, and all the students this school year,  
In Him,

Jason Greene

4. I'm thrilled about his marriage, his conversion to Christ, and his move to NYC. I've shared my excitement with him.
5. What stands out to you about his story?
  - a. Among other things, I'm struck by his vision of his future.
    - 1) He knew what he wanted to do with his life.
    - 2) He fell short, however, in his vision of what to be in his life -- until his life was changed by radical faith in Christ.
  - b. What about you?
    - 1) What do you want to do with your life?
    - 2) What do you want to BE?
    - 3) Is there a new vision God wants to give to you about yourself at the beginning of a new school year?
  - c. It took the death of his close friend, and a personal near-death experience for Jason to "come to himself and to return to the Father."
  - d. Will it take the same for you?
6. Regardless of where you are on your spiritual journey, the "Hand of Heaven," as the poem describes God, is pursuing you and challenging you to be the person He wants you to be.
  - a. I hope you are asking the character question – the **being** question – regarding your life.
  - b. What does God want you and me to be?

Remember these points:

I. God's vision for us is that we be "men and women of good and godly character." (II Peter 3:11-12) (NIV: "What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives.")

A. D. L. Moody once wrote, "If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself."

1. Character is different from reputation. William Davis highlights the difference:

Reputation is what you are supposed to be;  
character is what you are....

Reputation is what you have when you come to a new community;  
character is what you have when you go away.

Your reputation is made in a moment;  
your character is built in a lifetime....

Reputation makes you rich or makes you poor;  
character makes you happy or makes you miserable....

Reputation is what men say about you on your tombstone;  
character is what the angels say about you before the throne of God.

2. As you begin your studies at MVNU, or return to campus to continue your studies, are you more interested in your character or in your reputation?

a. How can you know the difference?

b. Let me ask you some questions, and your answers will distinguish the difference.

- Who are your heroes?
- What do you read?
- How do you spend your free time?
- What do you watch on TV or at the movies?
- Where do you go on your dates?
- Are your words spoken to and about others:
  - Up-building or undermining,
  - Encouraging or discouraging,
  - Truth or gossip?
- How did you respond on Wednesday to Dr. Sanders' admonition to "Love God With Your Mind?"
- How close to the edge are you living?

3. Character does count. Character is what you are when no one else is around. Character is who we are in the pressure times of our lives.

- a. Character springs from the core values by which we build our lives.
- b. Character provides the moral compass by which we live our lives.
- c. Character captures what it is we most want our children to inherit from us.
- d. Character is always the wellspring and foundation of our outward actions.

B. Consequently, Christian character qualities must be intensely pursued.

1. Often I ponder this question: Do people around us see in us the character qualities identified by Peter?

a. Peter mentions in chapter I Peter 1:5-7 the qualities of faith, goodness, knowledge (or discernment), self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.

b. I'm afraid people around us may see or hear just the opposite, like

- |                                    |                 |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1) A <u>cynical</u> tongue         | 5) Manipulation |
| 2) A <u>judgmental</u> spirit      | 6) Lying        |
| 3) A <u>negative</u> attitude      | 7) Cheating     |
| 4) A <u>condescending</u> demeanor | 8) Immorality   |

c. And these negative attitudes and behaviors, if we do not guard our thoughts and spirit, will eat us alive. Perhaps we, even on our campus, have not escaped the temptation to cynicism, negativism, and condescension. God forgive us!

2. The Bible identifies for us very different character qualities to be intensely pursued, if we are to become men and women of good and godly character...who live holy and godly lives.

a. Paul's list in Ephesians 4:2 includes humility, gentleness, patience, and kindness.

b. The Old Testament prophet Micah asked, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

3. Dr. Francis Hesselbein, executive editor of Leader to Leader publication, stated recently, "Leadership is about who you are, not what you do."

C. MVNU values document outlines the character-building values we seek to instill in our students. (On our home page under "information about MVNU")

1. I will mention just one section of the document:

*We love God; therefore, we seek to express these foundational values:*

- a. *A Worshiping Community*
- b. *A Biblical Faith*
- c. *A Christ-like Lifestyle*
- d. *A Holiness Ethic*

2. We want these values to characterize us at our best and to convict us at our worst.
3. Remember, God's vision for us is that we be men and women of good and godly character...individuals who live holy and godly lives.

## II. Good and godly character must be intentionally developed in our lives.

1. Hudson Taylor wrote, "Pray as if it all depended on God and work as if it depended on you."
  - a. Peter tells us in Chapter II Peter 1:3, that "God's divine power has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness."
  - b. On the other hand, in verse 5, we are challenged to "make every effort to add to your faith these qualities."
    - 1) In other words, the character qualities identified by Peter flow from a life that has been saved by God's grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ, who calls us to a life of holy living.
    - 2) Yet these very qualities of the holy life must be nurtured, cultivated, and developed throughout our lives if we truly are to be Christ-like.
2. Christian character formation, I am coming to see, takes place over a lifetime, and is shaped through our responses to scriptural imperatives, and through a process of brokenness and prayer.
  - a) I have discovered a painful yet fascinating relationship between brokenness and character development.
  - b) I must continually ask the question in the conflict situations of life: what is God needing to teach me about my character through this circumstance, or through this encounter . . . at MVNU, at home, or on the job?

- c) Letter from a student leader asking forgiveness for what she perceived was an embarrassment to MVNU.

3. Remember the chorus:

*His strength is perfect when our strength is gone,  
He'll carry us when we can't carry on;  
Raised in His power, the weak become strong;  
His strength is perfect, His strength is perfect.*

F. Five questions have helped me in a life-long pursuit of Christian character development. Perhaps they will help you.

1. Will this action strengthen me spiritually?
2. Would I want my son, my wife, or my best friend to copy this action of mine?
3. Does this action violate a biblical principle?
4. Does this action strengthen the body of Christ?
5. Would an unbelieving friend be attracted to Christ and the Christian faith by my behavior?

G. The book *Becoming a Person of Influence* states that “many succeed momentarily by what they know, some succeed temporarily by what they do, but few succeed permanently by who they are.”

1. Remember, Christian character formation is a life-changing and lifelong process, nurtured primarily by the spiritual disciplines of confession, silence, prayer, the trials and testings of our faith, and made effective in our lives by His grace and His strength alone!
2. I sing often the chorus I first heard at a Promise Keepers rally:

*Grace alone, which God supplies,  
Strength unknown, He will provide,  
Christ in us, our Cornerstone;  
We will go forth in grace alone.*

III. Godly character development begins with the transforming work of God in our lives through the new birth.

A. Nicodemus, in John chapter 3, verses 1-8 basically asked Jesus “How do I begin this quest for a ‘good and godly’ character – a holy and godly life?”

1. Nicodemus had an excellent **reputation**.
  - a. He belonged to the strictest religious group of the day.

- 1) He observed the law.
  - 2) He fasted regularly
  - 3) He prayed often
  - 4) He paid a tithe of his income
- b. He was a member of the Sanhedrin
- 1) One of the 70 elders who governed the religious and social life of the people.
  - 2) He had authority and prestige.
  - 3) He was educated and well off, and
  - 4) respected in the community
2. And Jesus said to this man with an excellent reputation, “You must be born again.”
3. When a person is “born again,” he/she is born anew by the Spirit of God.
- a. We come alive to spiritual truth.
- b. We receive a new nature
- 1) As a child of God we partake of the holiness of God
  - 2) There is in us a radical change of conduct and character
    - a) II Cor 5:17 “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old things have passed away, the new has come.
    - b) This is more than just patchwork, or outward reformation.
    - c) This is an inner, moral transformation.
    - d) This truly is a mystery.
- c. Nicodemus was puzzled (3:9-12; 16-21)
- 1) The new birth or new life in Christ, is a mystery because it is a miracle of God.
  - 2) “God was in Christ, reconciling the world until himself.” II Cor. 5:16-21.
    - a) Christ took our sin upon himself and died in our place.
    - b) He took the initiative and did for us what we could not do for ourselves.
- B. So the question becomes for everyone of us: How will we respond to what God has done for us?

1. He has acted.
  - a. How should we react?
  - b. We can respond in radical faith or we can remain in disbelief.
2. Are you living on your **reputation**, or do you know that you've been born again by the Spirit of God?
  - a. Has Christ's **character** been formed in you, and are you growing and maturing in Christ-likeness?
  - b. If not, I encourage you to:
    - 1) Ask Him to forgive you for the sins you have committed. (You need to repent – say “I’m sorry) for my sins.)
    - 2) Believe that he came to save you and he can save you now! (It is not my brother, nor my sister, but me, O, Lord, standing in the need of prayer.
    - 3) And, Confess Him as Lord of your life...your Savior, your Redeemer.
    - 4) And, confess that you want His life – His character – to be shaped in you.

## CONCLUSION

1. I ask you to consider this question as I conclude:
 

“When you complete this school year, or at the end of your life on earth,

**Will you be remembered more for your character than for your reputation?”**
2. It took a hospital experience to show him, but Jason came to the realization that character was critical.
  - a. Will you have to “hit the wall” before God gets your attention?
  - b. How far do you have to slide from faith in and commitment to Christ before you realize the shallowness of your faith?
3. Peter comes down squarely on the side of godly character and holy living.
4. He admonishes you and me to be “men and women of good and godly character”— individuals who live holy and godly lives.

- a. Individuals whose lives are characterized by:  
faith, goodness, discernment, self control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.
- b. Why? So that we will be effective and productive in the things that count for eternity!
- c. God will enable and empower you to be just exactly the person He envisions and calls you to be.
  - 1) And, He wants to begin this process in you today!
  - 2) Are you willing, this morning, to let God begin His new work in your life?
  - 3) Jason wished he had responded earlier.
  - 4) What will be your story?
5. Prayer.
6. Invitation hymn.