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Mitt Romney Delivers Commencement Address At Liberty University

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Mitt Romney | May 12, 2012



For the graduates, this moment marks a clear ending and a clear beginning. The task set before you four years ago is now completed in full. To the class of 2012: Well done, and congratulations.

Some of you may have taken a little longer than four years to complete your studies. One graduate has said that he completed his degree in only two terms: Clinton's and Bush's.

In some ways, it is fitting that I share this distinction with Truett Cathy. The Romney campaign comes to a sudden stop when we spot a Chick-fil-A. Your chicken sandwiches were our comfort food through the primary season, and there were days that we needed a lot of comforting. So, Truett, thank you and congratulations on your well-deserved honor today.

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There are some people here who are even more pleased than the graduates. Those would be the parents. Their years of prayers, devotion, and investment have added up to this joyful achievement. And with credit to Congressman Dick Armey: The American Dream is not owning your own home, it is getting your kids out of the home you own.

Lately, I've found myself thinking about life in four-year stretches. And let's just say that not everybody has achieved as much in these last four years as you have.

That's a theme for another day. But two observations. First, even though job opportunities are scarce in this economy, it is not for nothing that you have spent this time preparing. Jerry Falwell, Senior, long ago observed that "You do not determine a man's greatness by his talent or wealth, as the world does, but rather by what it takes to discourage him." America needs your skill and talent. If we take the right course, we will see a resurgence in the American economy that will surprise the world, and that will open new doors of opportunity for those who are prepared as you are.

Of course, what the next four years might hold for me is yet to be determined. But I will say that things are looking up, and I take your kind hospitality today as a sign of good things to come.

I consider it a great life honor to address you today. Your generosity of spirit humbles me. The welcoming spirit of Liberty is a tribute to the gracious Christian example of your founder.

In his 73 years of life, Dr. Falwell left a big mark. For nearly five decades he shared that walk with his good wife Macel. It's wonderful to see her today. The calling Jerry answered was not an easy one. Today we remember him as a courageous and big-hearted minister of the Gospel who never feared an argument, and never hated an adversary. Jerry deserves the tribute he would have treasured most, as a cheerful, confident champion for Christ.

I will always remember his cheerful good humor and selflessness. Several years ago, in my home, my wife and I were posing for a picture together with him. We wanted him to be in the center of the photo, but he insisted that Ann be in the middle, with he and I on the sides. He explained, by pointing to me and himself, "You see, Christ died between two thieves."

Maybe the most confident step Jerry ever took was to open the doors of this school 41 years ago.

He believed that Liberty might become one of the most respected Christian universities anywhere on earth. And so it is today.

He believed, even when the first graduating class consisted of 13 students, that year after year young Christians would be drawn to such a university in ever-greater numbers. And here you are.

Today, thanks to what you have gained here, you leave Liberty with conviction and confidence as your armor. You know what you believe. You know who you are. And you know Whom you will serve. Not all colleges instill that kind of confidence, but it will be among the most prized qualities from your education here. Moral certainty, clear standards, and a commitment to spiritual ideals will set you apart in a world that searches for meaning.

That said, your values will not always be the object of public admiration. In fact, the more you live by your beliefs, the more you will endure the censure of the world. Christianity is not the faith of the complacent, the comfortable or of the timid. It demands and creates heroic souls like Wesley, Wilberforce, Bonhoeffer, John Paul the Second, and Billy Graham. Each showed, in their own way, the relentless and powerful influence of the message of Jesus Christ. May that be your guide.

You enter a world with civilizations and economies that are far from equal. Harvard historian David Landes devoted his lifelong study to understanding why some civilizations rise, and why others falter. His conclusion: Culture makes all the difference. Not natural resources, not geography, but what people believe and value. Central to America's rise to global leadership is our Judeo-Christian tradition, with its vision of the goodness and possibilities of every life.

The American culture promotes personal responsibility, the dignity of work, the value of education, the merit of service, devotion to a purpose greater than self, and, at the foundation, the pre-eminence of the family.

The power of these values is evidenced by a Brookings Institution study that Senator Rick Santorum brought to my attention. For those who graduate from high school, get a full-time job, and marry before they have their first child, the probability that they will be poor is 2%. But, if those things are absent, 76% will be poor. Culture matters.

As fundamental as these principles are, they may become topics of democratic debate. So it is today with the enduring institution of marriage. Marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman.

The protection of religious freedom has also become a matter of debate. It strikes me as odd that the free exercise of religious faith is sometimes treated as a problem, something America is stuck with instead of blessed with. Perhaps religious conscience upsets the designs of those who feel that the highest wisdom and authority comes from government.

But from the beginning, this nation trusted in God, not man. Religious liberty is the first freedom in our Constitution. And whether the cause is justice for the persecuted, compassion for the needy and the sick, or mercy for the child waiting to be born, there is no greater force for good in the nation than Christian conscience in action.

Religious freedom opens a door for Americans that is closed to too many others around the world. But whether we walk through that door, and what we do with our lives after we do, is up to us.

Someone once observed that the great drama of Christianity is not a crowd shot, following the movements of collectives or even nations. The drama is always personal, individual, unfolding in one's own life. We're not alone in sensing this. Men and women of every faith, and good people with none at all, sincerely strive to do right and lead a purpose-driven life.

And, in the way of lessons learned, by hitting the mark or by falling short, I can tell you this much for sure.

All that you have heard here at Liberty University – about trusting in God and in His purpose for each of us--makes for more than a good sermon. It makes for a good life. So many things compete for our attention and devotion. That doesn't stop as you get older. We are all prone, at various turns, to treat the trivial things as all-important, the all-important things as trivial, and little by little lose sight of the one thing that endures forever.

No person I have ever met, not even the most righteous or pure of heart, has gone without those times when faith recedes in the busy-ness of life. It's normal, and sometimes even the smallest glimpses of the Lord's work in our lives can reawaken our hearts. They bring us back to ourselves – and, better still, to something far greater than ourselves.

What we have, what we wish we had – ambitions fulfilled, ambitions disappointed ... investments won, investments lost ... elections won, elections lost – these things may occupy our attention, but they do not define us. And each of them is subject to the vagaries and serendipities of life. Our relationship with our Maker, however, depends on none of this. It is entirely in our control, for He is

always at the door, and knocks for us. Our worldly successes cannot be guaranteed, but our ability to achieve spiritual success is entirely up to us, thanks to the grace of God. The best advice I know is to give those worldly things your best but never your all, reserving the ultimate hope for the only one who can grant it.

Many a preacher has advised the same, but few as memorably as Martin Luther King, Jr. "As a young man," he said, "with most of my life ahead of me, I decided early to give my life to something eternal and absolute. Not to these little gods that are here today and gone tomorrow. But to God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

In this life, the commitments that come closest to forever are those of family.

My Dad, George Romney, was a CEO, a governor, and a member of the President's Cabinet. My wife Ann asked him once, "What was your greatest accomplishment?" Without a moment's pause, he said, "Raising our four kids."

Ann and I feel the same way about our family. I have never once regretted missing a business opportunity so that I could be with my children and grandchildren. Among the things in life that can be put off, being there when it matters most isn't one of them.

As C.S. Lewis is said to have remarked, "The home is the ultimate career. All other careers exist for one purpose, and that is to support the ultimate career."

Promotions often mark the high points in a career, and I hope I haven't seen my last. But sometimes the high points come in unexpected ways. I was asked to help rescue the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City.

I'm embarrassed now to recall that when this opportunity was first presented to me, I dismissed it out of hand. I was busy, I was doing well, and, by the way, my lack of athletic prowess did not make the Olympics a logical step. In fact, after I had accepted the position, my oldest son called me and said, "Dad, I've spoken to the brothers. We saw the paper this morning. We want you to know there's not a circumstance we could have conceived of that would put you on the front page of the sports section."

The Olympics were not a logical choice, but it was one of the best and most fulfilling choices of my life. Opportunities for you to serve in meaningful ways may come at inconvenient times, but that will make them all the more precious.

People of different faiths, like yours and mine, sometimes wonder where we can meet in common purpose, when there are so many differences in creed and theology. Surely the answer is that we can meet in service, in shared moral convictions about our nation stemming from a common worldview. The best case for this is always the example of Christian men and women working and witnessing to carry God's love into every life – people like the late Chuck Colson.

Not long ago, Chuck recounted a story from his days just after leaving prison. He was assured by people of influence that, even with a prison record, a man with his connections and experience could still live very comfortably. They would make some calls, get Chuck situated, and set him up once again as an important man. His choice at that crossroads would make him, instead, a great man.

The call to service is one of the fundamental elements of our national character. It has motivated every great movement of conscience that this hopeful, fair-minded country of ours has ever seen. Sometimes, as Dr. Viktor Frankl observed in a book for the ages, it is not a matter of what we are asking of life, but rather what life is asking of us. How often the answer to our own troubles is to help others with theirs.

In all of these things – faith, family, work, and service – the choices we make as Americans are, in other places, not choices at all. For so many on this earth, life is filled with orders, not options, right down to where they live, the work they do, and how many children the state will permit them to have. All the more reason to be grateful, this and every day, that we live in America, where the talents God gave us may be used in freedom.

At this great Christian institution, you have all learned a thing or two about these gifts and the good purposes they can serve. They are yours to have and yours to share. Sometimes, your Liberty education will set you apart, and always it will help direct your path. And as you now leave, and make for new places near and far, I hope for each one of you that your path will be long and life will be kind.

The ideals that brought you here ... the wisdom you gained here ... and the friends you found here – may these blessings be with you always, wherever you go.

Thank you all, and God bless you.



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