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VIRGINIA BEACH, VIRGINIA

Thank you very much, President Slosser for that most generous introduction. This is one weekend in Virginia Beach which I have long anticipated -- and for much more than the usual possibilities of escape offered by the sun's rays and the sound of pounding surf. No: escape is not exactly what I have on my mind this morning. For amidst the pomp and ceremony of this day, the recollection of past achievements and the anticipation of future loan vouchers; there is the undeniable fact that today signals not the end, but the beginning of a lifelong commitment. For the graduates, this is a ceremony of pride, to be sure -- but also of challenge. And the moment anyone declares the world to be your oyster, just remember how the pearl got to be inside. It got there through friction, through rubbing up against the soft, comfortable creature within its shell. Your education most assuredly provides the tools for similar challenge to this old and imperfect world, whenever and wherever it falls short of the Christian ideal.

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You have come to Virginia Beach from virtually every American state, and nearly a dozen foreign countries. Many of you have chosen to continue your studies long after the conventional undergraduate years. Indeed, there is a recipient of a master's degree in education who is 82 years young. And Josephine Brown, wherever you are --you are an inspiration to us all. What's more, you are a shining example to any who mistakenly view the educational process as the exclusive province of youth.

For there are many approaches to education, and experience conducts its own seminar. Mark Twain once wrote that as a boy of fourteen, his father was so ignorant he could hardly stand to have him around. By the time Mark reached twenty-one, however, he was astonished at how much the Old Man had learned in just seven years. That's one kind of education. There's another to be found in the classroom, or on the playing field, in the science lab and in the church pew. One comes while bent over an exam book, another while kneeling before an altar. You have sampled them all. Here at CBNU, you have been encouraged to find life in books -- and to apply lessons from the greatest of books to life. Here, you have been trained in communications, as counselors and business administrators, as educators and public officials. Many of you will go on to shape the events of your time. All the better, then to have discovered that you can't make good public policy without first having a set of private principles. Whether on the floor of Congress or in the backrooms of diplomacy, there is no body of professional expertise and no corpus of case studies, which can supplant the force of character. To educate in mind and not in morals is to make bricks without straw.

Think about the American nation and the people we profess to be. At the very beginning of this republic, even before there was a United States of America, there were 13 squabbling colonies struggling to define their mission in the world. And within those tiny nation-states, those embryonic Americas, there were individuals bound together by their faith, a faith in God their Creator, and a faith in one another, His Creation. One of their earliest prophets was a public servant in a stern black robe, a true believer who held his followers to a high standard of community. His name was John Winthrop, and not long after the first Thanksgiving was celebrated, this devout layman mounted a makeshift pulpit aboard his flagship bound for the New World. And he delivered a sermon, the likes of which had never been heard before, and which ever since has served to unite all those who followed in his wake.

This is what John Winthrop said, "We must delight in each other, make others' conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together: always having before our eyes our commission and our community... For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world." In short, said Winthrop, "we have made a covenant with our God, no less sacred than that made by ancient Israel."

Now, Winthrop was talking as a public man. But he was preaching the necessity of living private lives in such a way as to enhance the common good of all. He was warning his floating congregation of what lay ahead should they fail to heed God's message, or forget for a moment their own divinely ordained mission. What was that mission? They were sent into a New World to avoid the mistakes of the Old. They were dispatched on God's errand, into a wilderness where the winters would be long, the climate harsh, and the temptations great. They would be tested, every day of their lives. But in the process, they would also be given an historic opportunity, to purify themselves and advance their faith. Like the people of ancient Israel, they were being given a chance to start the world over again. And they were being allowed by a generous God to cleanse the sin of past transgressions from their own, all-too-human existence.

Winthrop's body of settlers set sail a long time ago. And yet their example continues to inspire Americans. For we, too, are on a voyage -- a voyage of discovery -- a voyage we make as individual travelers and as a nation in pursuit of divine favor. How we conduct ourselves under sail is a direct reflection of our belief in God and our willingness to subordinate personal ambition to public necessity. We set our course by the stars which He has hung out in the heavens above. And along the way, we have daily opportunities to grow in the knowledge of the Lord.

Long ago, Aristotle told us that, "All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the facts of empires depend on the education of youth." In today's world, we have redefined the old concept of empire. Today, it is the empire of the mind that matters most. And it is here, in classrooms like these, that the battle is fought against narrow self-interest and a conformity swallowed like pills. It is not too much to say that he who enters a university walks on hallowed ground. For here, we discover much more than a knowledge factory. Here, higher learning means higher yearning. And it is only fitting to regard Commencement Day as the beginning of a journey, a passage toward perfection charted by your own daring and limited only by your own imagination.

CBNU has encouraged each of you to become involved, to make some history of your own; certainly to make a difference in all whose lives you touch. And if I can impart a final lesson to this year's graduates, it is the importance of distinguishing between real perfectionism, which is selfless and timeless, and the shallow, brittle variety which thrives on ego and confuses individual regard with social advance.

I speak from my own experiences. For I grew up, not so far from here, in a Carolina home where the Gospel was as much a part of daily life as fried chicken and azaleas in the spring. My grandmother was my role model, a remarkable woman who lived to within two weeks of her 100th birthday. She was as perfect a Christian as I have ever had the privilege to know. In a tragic accident, Mom Cathey lost a son at the hands of a drunk driver. The insurance policy on his life built a hospital wing in far-off Pakistan. "Vernon, she said, never had a chance to make his own contribution." She

was not at all a wealthy woman, as the world measures such things. But anything she could spare went to support ministers at home and missions abroad, to spread the gospel. In her nineties, as she entered a nursing home, she welcomed the opportunity. As she put it, "There might be some people here who don't know the Lord. And I can read the Bible to them."

I never heard an unkind word escape her lips in all the years I knew her; I never saw an ungracious deed mar her path.

And because my grandmother seemed perfect, it was only natural that I wanted to follow in her footsteps. I remember playing the piano for the Men's Bible Class, serving as President of the Methodist Youth Fellowship. I was a regular at Sunday school and church. I loved the church summers at Lake Juanaluska. But as we move along, how often in our busy lives something becomes a barrier to total commitment of one's life to the Lord! In some cases it may be money, power, prestige... Or it may just be the wish to perfect oneself -- to work harder, longer -- to achieve, to excel, to do one's best 100 percent of the time.

In my own case, career became of paramount importance. It wasn't that I had to reach a particular goal. Rather, it was just that everything had to be done by my standards of perfection, the world's standards of perfection. Don't get me wrong -- I think we should strive to do our best at what we undertake. But a perfectionist may take it to extremes, fail to see the point of diminishing returns. Worst of all, he or she may lose sight of true perfection, the kind referred to in Matthew 5:48 where we read, "Be perfect as I am perfect." That's a different kind of perfectionism, isn't it? Yes.

I tried to control everything in my life, surmount every difficulty, foresee every problem, realize every opportunity. That's pretty tough on your family, your friends, your fellow workers and on your self. My perfectionism began crowding out what Mom Cathey had taught me were life's most important priorities.

I was blessed with a beautiful marriage, a challenging career... and yet ... only gradually, over many years, did I realize what was missing from my life -- that this ego-centered life was not a source of genuine satisfaction, that in hankering after a false perfectionism, my life was threatened with spiritual starvation. Serving God, after all, requires self-abandonment. And self-abandonment doesn't come naturally to Washington-type "need achievers" and perfectionists. But God leads us, I believe, no faster than we're ready for these situations and those persons who can help us. It was my minister in Washington who gradually helped me to see what joy there is when God is the center of life, and all else flows from that center. A spiritual growth group gave me renewed strength as I met each Monday night with others who shared my desire to reorder priorities. Bible study with other Senate wives added to my sense of spiritual growth. Before long, I thought less about perfection as measured in schedules and briefing papers, and more about such views as those

expressed by my friend, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale whose seminar I addressed on Thanksgiving Day.

The man who lives for himself is a failure. Even if he gains much wealth, position or power, he is still a failure. The man who lives for others has achieved true success. A rich man who consecrates his wealth and his position to the good of humanity is a success. A poor man who gives his service and his sympathy has achieved true success, even though material prosperity or outward honors never come to him. Those are powerful words.

Sometimes, however, as we move along the journey of life, it seems as if the challenges are almost insurmountable -- it's at times like this I think of President Reagan's comment about his early days as Governor of California. "Each morning began," he said, "with someone standing before my desk describing yet another newly discovered disaster. The feeling of stress became unbearable. I had the urge to look over my shoulder for someone I could pass the problem to. One day it came to me that I was looking in the wrong direction. I looked up instead of back. I'm still looking up. I couldn't face one day in this office if I didn't know I could ask God's help and it would be given."

Today, you embark on new challenges of your own. But before you leave this place, do not forget why you came. You came to learn but also to lead. Let us remember Matthew 5:48, where our Lord says "Be perfect as I am perfect." America was founded by seekers after such perfection. And there's nothing in the Constitution which precludes committed Christians from voicing or voting their concerns. The wall between Church and state should not be confused with a moat. And neither history nor reason suggests that there can be any enduring system of morality without a spiritual base.

The public expression of our faith in God, through prayer, is fundamental -- a part of our American heritage and a privilege which should not be excluded from our schools. The first amendment was never intended to require the government to discriminate against religious speech.

John Winthrop, long ago served notice that in America, we would worship God before government. The record of the Constitutional Convention leaves no doubt that the Founding Fathers were sustained by their faith in God, and the Declaration of Independence affirms that all men are "endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights." George Washington once said, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports."

Likewise, our history of social reforms has deep spiritual underpinning. John Wesley pioneered social reforms in addition to proclaiming the gospel. William Wilberforce led the move to abolish slavery. General William Booth preached salvation -- and founded the Salvation Army. Like our Founding Fathers who shaped our political history, these were people of spiritual strength.

I know you too, have made a personal commitment to things of the spirit. You would not be enrolled here if you had not. The inheritance into which you are entering includes a land in the throes of national renewal -- an America born again. It is a joyous time to be professionals, gifted and committed to the faith. A time to move mountains of inertia, and part seas of red ink.

Public service is my mission field, and indeed, we face tremendous challenges in transportation across all modes. We will need the best and the brightest to join us in meeting the challenges. I invite you today to enter public service. You may not get rich, but you will enrich the lives of millions. Your rewards may not be material, but rather the satisfaction of service -- making a real difference -- a positive difference -- in people's lives.

At the outset, I quoted Woodrow Wilson, one of the great moralists in American public life. It was Wilson who declared "We should not only use all the brains we have, but all that we can borrow."

Today, America herself applies for a very special loan -- borrowing not only the brains assembled in this audience, but the faith that guides them. The road to the kind of perfection we understand is a narrow one; it is the road less traveled. And it is a rugged road. But from this path, you can challenge the world, and you can change it. Now and always, life is an affirmation of faith. Touch the hem of heaven, and God will guide your steps --and you will guide a nation. May God bless you, now and always.