

In Praise of Academic Excellence

Dean's List Ceremony

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It is my pleasure today to address you, the students who have achieved a place on Milligan College's Dean's list, and your parents and friends who have come to participate in this ceremony meant to honor your achievements. The Dean's List at Milligan, as at many colleges, is an important indication of academic success. Because we believe in academic rigor at Milligan, your place on the Dean's list is a clear indication of a real effort and success. I congratulate you on this honor.

I want to focus my thoughts this morning on a simple theme which seems particularly *apropos* for this setting, but which also increasingly seems a bit antiquated and even embattled in today's society. The theme I want to address is simply termed "In Praise of Academic Excellence." I propose as a thesis the idea that, especially for Christians in our modern world, Academic Excellence is something to honor because (1) it furthers our ability to understand and appreciate our place in the world, (2) it enhances our ability to lead a world that desperately needs good moral leadership, and (3) it helps establish personal moral quality of personal discipline.

1. Academic Excellence Helps One Understand and Appreciate the World.

Perhaps at the very heart of our concept of liberal arts here at Milligan, we believe that the more we learn about the classic disciplines of humanities and sciences, the more we learn about what it means to be human. And as we learn what it means to be human, we can better find our place in the world in a way that will be more fulfilling, more productive, and ultimately more effective – both in our personal lives and in our public interaction.

I have been permitted the last few years to give a final lecture in our Humanities course which addresses this general subject: What Does It Mean to be Human? Many of you may have already heard this lecture. I approach the subject from a frankly theological stance, yet seek to apply it to the wide span of subjects which make up our curriculum at Milligan. Briefly stated, I argue that to really understand our humanity, we must grapple with the concept “image of God”, for the Bible opens with the idea that humans were created in the image of God, and in many ways closes with that idea – in that Jesus is the perfect image of God, and we as Christians are asked to grow up into Him who has shown God’s nature to us most fully.

Well, what is the image of God? There are numerous aspects of humanity’s uniqueness that can claim to be facets of God’s image – the power to manage the world; the ability to create new things -- from rudimentary tools to jet engines; the ability to communicate and use language to express our innermost ideas and feelings; the constant drive to seek meaningful relationships, which of course includes our families, but also includes communities, societies, and all the other social interactions that make us more than simply individuals. Each of these features of our innate humanity reflects God’s own nature: His absolute power to create and rule the world; His own use of language perhaps most vividly seen in his “speaking” the world into existence, and the fact that His son is known as the Word who was made flesh; and His own love for relationships that led Him to send His son to die in order to express His absolute love for us.

Each of these features of humanity, however, has been abused by us. We have used our power to despoil the earth and enslave our fellow human beings, even as we have found untold riches and productivity in the deepest parts of the earth and in the soil we till. We have created destructive

technology, even while we push back the bounds of knowledge in order to save lives. Our use of language has been used to divide, inflame, and lead astray, even though we have produced lyrical poems and thrilling plays that help us understand the impulses that drive us. And we have twisted our desire for relationships so that we often use others, even while we seek to create more functional communities.

As Christians in an academic environment, we have the opportunity – indeed the responsibility – to explore the history of our successes and failures to better understand who we are as humans. Can we understand the impulses that drive us to distort the image of God, so that we can learn to avoid them? Can we understand the positive forces in our society that find Christ emerging in our very midst so that we can amplify and encourage them? This, it seems to me, is the bright hope of teaching the liberal arts, of exploring the humanities, of mastering the disciplines of the natural sciences. By learning more of our history, by exploring the creative impulses of art and literature, by understanding the secrets of the molecules and the complex organisms, we learn more about our place in this world. And this will make us more fully human, more fully aware, more engaged with the world and appreciative of the very gift of life that God has given us. Excellence in studying these subjects opens up ways of understanding that would simply be closed off if we only drift into life with our eyes and ears closed. And the greater the effort, the greater the focus on these subjects increases the payoff for a lifetime of living, of working, of loving the manifold gifts that God has graced us with.

2. Academic Excellence Prepares Leaders to Shape Culture.

Secondly, and closely related to the foregoing example, academic excellence in particular furthers the goal of Christian leadership. As I have already suggested, the image of God in our human

existence is easily bent to negative ends. I believe it is our role as Christians to lead the world toward a positive view of human potential, one which is guided by His word. We have attempted to summarize this in a vision of what our task at Milligan is: “Changing lives and shaping culture.” These are very bold words. But we do believe that a Christian education can do just that – change lives and shape culture, towards a God-shaped view of humanity. This is what we hope you students will do with your education – go out into the world and change it for the better.

But if you are going to engage the powers that be in this world, the powers that would distort the gifts of God, then more than simple platitudes will do. It will take critical thought, an ability to engage in the world of ideas, the ability to speak boldly, to write clearly, to know why you think the thoughts you think. Only when you are prepared to engage the world with the best tools of the critical mind can you truly lead the world, and be able to influence it for the better.

And here is where academic excellence serves the Kingdom of God. As you focus on your studies in this cloistered environment, you are gaining skills in critical thinking and communication. You are gaining the tools you need to become leaders and shapers of culture. Academic excellence is not just about achieving good grades, then. It is about equipping yourselves with the very armor of God.

3. Academic Excellence Develops Personal Discipline

And finally, the pursuit of academic excellence helps each of us as individuals to learn the value of personal discipline, a quality which will have long-lasting benefits in a lifetime of “real world” pursuits. Even if academia is somewhat removed from the rough and tumble of daily work schedules, jobs and careers, it actually provides necessary character traits that serve well for a whole lifetime.

As you have undoubtedly discovered, good grades do not come easily. They require work,

time management, the ability to stick-to the task of juggling multiple subjects and requirements. As many students find, innate intelligence is probably less important in college than learning how to do the work. We increasingly are finding that a high school g.p.a. is a better predictor of student success than ACT's or SAT's. Why? Because it probably tells more about a student's work habits – habits which become even more important in the college environment.

Academic excellence is usually a sign of discipline, of hard work, of attention to detail, of following through on assignments and tasks. I am reminded that in my Ph.D. program, my advisor noted that many bright graduate students never complete their degree because they cannot finish the dissertation. The dissertation is 90% perspiration, and only 10% inspiration. In the same way, your pursuit of academic excellence is doing as much to prepare you by causing you to perspire. And this discipline of hard work will pay off in a lifetime of efforts – personal and professional.

Conclusion

So to you students who have shown that you can achieve Academic Excellence, I say congratulations. You have chosen the better path. You have laid the foundation for a fulfilling, effective, and disciplined life. You have, I would suggest, heeded the admonition of the author of Proverbs:

My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom, inclining your heart to understanding;
if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding;
if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures—
then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.

For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.