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Words of wisdom: Learners rather than knowers: 2023 Commencement address

Ben Sells

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Words of wisdom: Learners rather than knowers: 2023 Commencement address

By Ben Sells

May 18, 2023

For more information, contact Ouachita's Office of Communications & Marketing at comm-mark@obu.edu or (870) 245-5206.

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. — Based on what your predecessors report, your Ouachita education and experience have prepared you exceedingly well. Indeed, the investment in you by faculty and staff, the support of your family and classmates, the time and effort you have put forward and the grace of God help you go from this place with an advantage.

You can be confident about that advantage. The more you steward it, the more of an opportunity it will provide.

In preparing for Commencement, I ponder and pray that I might leave you, and each graduating class, with a few words of wisdom on this day – your day. I find them from advice shared with me during the past six decades by older and wiser Christian people.

For the Class of 2023, it is this: The most effective people are “learners” rather than “knowers.”

In a brief address, we can't fully explore this insight. So let me share a story and suggest how its moral will allow you to build on your Ouachita advantage.

I hope you have a supervisor early in your career or calling who will invest in you the way Sam James invested in me. Sam hired me in 1997 to help build a leadership development program for the Southern Baptist International Mission Board.

Sam would give more than 50 years to ministry, often in the world's most difficult places. He was also an educator who sought to understand what made for the most effective and long-term cross-cultural workers.

He noticed that missionaries started with advantages. They had often earned a graduate degree, matured spiritually and achieved a measure of success in ministry and other vocations like health.

Yet, their assignment meant moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from being known to unknown, from being near family to far away. They had to learn and adapt to a new community, new culture and new language. They were called to share good news in hard places, a complex and challenging calling.

Few people do it; fewer still do it exceedingly well.

As Sam studied what allowed some to become more effective than others, he noticed one characteristic was preeminent: They were learners rather than knowers.

Knowers, assuming they have arrived, draw only on what they have learned. Learners, on the other hand, never stop learning; they continue to adjust, adapt and add to their advantages.

Before meeting Sam, I had learned this the hard way.

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Dr. Ben Sells
Ouachita president

In 1986, through the International Mission Board, Lisa and I spent a year in China becoming the first foreigners to live in our city since World War II. It was a very different and still-developing China. Our only communication with family was by letter.

We were 24 years old, graduates of a Baptist university, sincere in our Christian commitment and eager to change the world. Yet it was a new experience for us, and it was difficult. Among many lessons, it taught us what we did not know – which allowed us to take a significant step in our growth from knowers to learners.

Graduates, you've achieved a measure of success and leave here with certain advantages. Yet you, too, are moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar. You'll join new places to work or study, new communities and churches. You desire to excel and flourish, and this great cloud of witnesses will support and pray for you.

May I recommend to you what Sam James commended to me, to be learners rather than knowers? As you pursue that goal, here are three suggestions for your consideration.

Cultivate Humility

To reach Commencement Day, you have taken responsibility for your growth and success – and must continue to do so – but you didn't do it alone.

What you've accomplished was also made possible by God's help, the caring of parents and family, the talent of Ouachita faculty and staff, support of classmates and scholarships provided by alumni and churches.

Learners know the importance of humility.

We cultivate humility by prizing God as our first love, looking out for the best interests of others, remembering how much we don't know and seeking wisdom as if it were hidden treasure. We live in a world absorbed with self, saturated with information and starved for wisdom. Cultivating humility is part of the pathway to wisdom.

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Foster Character

You have developed competence through your efforts inside and outside the classroom. Your level of competence will continue to broaden and deepen, creating additional opportunities to make meaningful contributions.

Competence is essential, but insufficient.

Learners know that growing competence without growing character will diminish and even derail one's effectiveness.

So much from the Bible guides us to form Christ-like character in our lives. We foster character, with the help of the Holy Spirit, by increasingly becoming people marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Nourish Hope

We live with an abundance of knowledge, yet hopelessness abounds.

Learners understand the importance of hope, which is why one of my favorite Scriptures is Proverbs 13:12. It reads, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a dream fulfilled is a tree of life."

Christ-followers have reason to be the most hopeful of people. We nourish hope by believing and living out that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6); that the Lord is our helper, so we need not be afraid (Hebrews 13:6); that when we commit to the Lord whatever we do, he will establish our plans (Proverbs 16:3); and that no plan can succeed against the Lord (Proverbs 21:30).

Conclusion

In a moment, you go from being our students to being our alumni and friends.

We believe that your Ouachita education and degree give you an advantage. As you leave Ouachita and start a new chapter in your story, we'll continue to encourage and pray for you. We hope to hear from you about the milestones in your life, and we look forward to welcoming you back to campus.

Drawing from the wisdom of my mentor, Sam James, for your consideration, I believe you are more likely to flourish and excel in every area of life if you commit to be a learner, no matter how much you come to know.

To all our graduates, congratulations!