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Stewardship in every season: 2024 Commencement address

By Ben Sells

May 14, 2024

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

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. — This year's university theme has been "lives of meaningful work," a phrase in our mission statement focused on one purpose of a Ouachita education. There are many dimensions to a life of meaningful work. This morning, I want to highlight one: that we're called to be stewards in every season of life. This notion is illustrated in Scripture, and you exemplified it at Ouachita.

The Master Teacher, Jesus, tells a story about stewardship known as The Parable of the Talents that's recorded in Matthew 25.

Jesus begins this parable by saying: "The Kingdom of heaven is like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one – each according to his ability."

A talent in Jesus' time was a unit of money. Scholars would agree that one talent would be equal to a very large sum of money today. While the servants received different amounts, each received a significant amount.

Jesus then says the servant who received five talents and the servant who received two talents doubled the amounts given to them, but the servant who received one talent chose to bury it. After a long time had passed, the owner returned from the journey to hear a report.

For the two who doubled their talents, the owner of the property said, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master."

But the servant who hid the talent was judged harshly.

Allow me to briefly make three observations about stewardship and meaningful work from Jesus' story.

More about the present than the future

Stewardship is sometimes about the future. Your Ouachita education is an investment in your future. Yet, notice in the story that the reward goes to the servants who immediately act on what's entrusted to them. Because they are faithful to their assignment, their future involves being entrusted with more. But the one who appears to be more focused on the future – to preserving it for when the owner returns – is judged harshly. In every season of life, God calls us to faithful stewardship of the here and now.

More about responsibility than ability

Stewardship is about our God-given personality, gifts, strengths, family, relationships and life experiences that have contributed to who we are at any one moment. Each of us is a unique person made in God's image. Our abilities differ among us and present different opportunities in each season of life. Yet, what's important in this parable isn't the different number of talents distributed to the servants. Rather, what's important is how responsible they each were with what was entrusted to them.

Recall that the two servants who were entrusted with more talents both achieved a 100% return regardless of the initial amount entrusted to them. Their stewardship required a similar amount of work and wisdom, of risk and reward. It doesn't appear they spent much time comparing themselves to others, crowing about why they had more or complaining about why they had less. In every season of life, God calls us to be responsible stewards, leveraging our abilities to honor our divine calling.

More about service than self

Stewardship does involve caring for oneself. Yet, it's crucial to recognize that self-serving motives, illustrated by the servant who buried his talent, yield unfavorable outcomes.

The two faithful servants were responsible by serving the owner. I think it's likely that by enhancing what was entrusted to them, they improved life for others in their community. Their reward extended beyond increased talents and responsibilities. The owner also said to the two: "Enter into the joy of your master."

To understand the significance of this invitation, we must recognize in this parable that Jesus is the owner. He's called us to steward our Father's world, to serve others in his redemptive plan. He's even given us a helper, the Holy Spirit. One day he will return, and he will judge all. If we want to experience real joy and a life of truly meaningful work, we'll follow Jesus and steward well every season of life.

Demonstrated at Ouachita

To the graduating seniors who were freshmen in Fall 2020, you particularly exemplified the truths of this parable – of being stewards for this season of your lives known as Ouachita.

As we reflect on the past four years, I'm reminded of the remarkable journey we've shared. While my comments are given primarily with graduating seniors in mind, I believe they're relevant to our master's degree graduates, as well. Your life will forever be marked as a Ouachita graduate, and you will always remember your first year of college was marked by a global pandemic. Since the 2020 Commencement, I've referenced the pandemic because of how it shaped each class. This will be my final time to mention it, because it still stirs emotion in me and, more importantly, we're increasingly in a new season.

But there's something I want to tell you in our last moments of being together.

It was almost exactly four years ago we announced our intention for Ouachita to be in-person for Fall 2020. It wasn't a certainty that we could achieve this, but we were certain our Christian higher education mission for undergraduate students was best realized in a highly residential, relational and personalized context on this campus. It was an attempt of stewardship in an uncertain season as we experienced an event that hadn't occurred in the United States for 100 years.

In 2020, your faculty and staff labored over the summer to prepare and adjust their work for the academic year so we could attempt to be fully in-person. As we began that August, it required leadership from upperclassmen, generous support by churches and alumni, the prayers of many and God's grace.

But it also called upon freshmen, with support from parents, to work with us and to serve one another with the abilities we had. It called upon you to be a steward for a season, one that was unlike the normal freshman year. You didn't experience the first-year traditions that help knit together the Ouachita community. Nevertheless, despite the challenges of masks, the frustrations of distancing and the stresses of quarantines, together we found a way forward fully in-person – something only 5% of college students in our country experienced that year.

You were a smaller but stellar class. A higher percentage of your class returned for your sophomore year than at any time on record in Ouachita's history. Because of your example, the following freshman class in Fall 2021 – some graduating today – would be the largest freshman class in Ouachita's history.

Four years later, it's interesting to note the freshmen who didn't experience a Tiger Tunes, for example, would become the leaders who raised a record-breaking \$200,000 in scholarships through Tunes in their senior year, all for the benefit of underclassmen.

When a pandemic contributed to many universities retreating, what you did – what we did together – has contributed to Ouachita advancing.

Conclusion

As I close, please hear this from your university: "Well done, good and faithful students."

As you steward the next season of your life, you are well prepared. When you find yourself uncertain, recall the truths of the Parable of the Talents, and remember what you did here.

My affection for you and gratitude to you are deep, but there's another desire and hope for you that is greater – one that is foundational to a life of meaningful work: that when Jesus returns, you will hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

To every member in the Class of 2024, congratulations!



By Dr. Ben Sells, Ouachita president