

Kickoff Speech 2007

What is impossible from a human perspective is possible with God.

Luke 18:27

Introduction

If we had lived in London 220 years ago, we would have said that God's calling in the life of William Wilberforce was absolutely impossible.

Despite it being the most educated and sophisticated city in the world, it was a culture of hopelessness, where economic opportunity was tightly held in the hands of just a few, where disease and sickness was more normal than feeling healthy, and where labor abuses of both adults and children were the standard.

It was a place of horrible cruelty—including regular public gruesome executions. It was a society of vulgarity where crude jokes and nasty language were so expected that those who did not join in were considered untrustworthy.

It was a city where alcoholism was rampant in order to escape the harsh reality all around them and where cruelty to animals makes today's news reports of dog fighting look civilized. It was a place where prostitution was so accepted that 25% of the unmarried women in London were prostitutes, with their average age being 16 and many much younger.

It was a place that put little value on the dignity of life, except for the most privileged, and it was into this culture God called William Wilberforce to speak up to end slavery. Impossible!

It seems evident to us today that slavery was totally wrong, but in 1780s England slaves were considered a commodity. So in their misguided view, suggesting an end to slavery would be like saying today we should stop using cars and trucks because they hurt the environment. And that is not going to happen, no matter how much evidence is brought forward. You don't ban the most important commodity that fuels an economy.

But what is impossible from a human perspective is possible with God.

Even the courts of England had ruled that slaves were not people, but a commodity. On September 6, 1781 the slave ship *Zong* left the coast of Africa headed for Jamaica with 470 slaves packed into the hold. It had already been cruising the coastline for weeks picking up more Africans at each stop; and so, by the time they set sail, the slaves they held were already sick and dying. Chained together in dark decks just a few feet apart with no room to sit up, there was not enough space for all of them to lie on their back at once. Then as the boat creaked and rolled, the entire group of men tore their flesh on the bare boards of the multi-stacked and unventilated hold and the disease took hold quickly in that the unthinkable environment.

Because the captain miscalculated the course to Jamaica and the voyage was becoming labored, the Africans were dying at a faster rate than normal; and he was concerned that at the three-month mark 60 slaves had died. The Captain knew that he was paid nothing if a slave died in the voyage; but if there was a problem beyond the captain's control that caused him to lose his cargo, then the insurance company would pay him in full for his losses – about \$4,000 in today's economy for each slave.

So calling on a maritime law that allowed the captain to jettison cargo in order to save the ship, he brought the sickest slaves to the deck and threw them overboard to the waiting sharks that always followed slave ships in their crossing to take advantage of the dead.

When they finally reached their destination, the Captain claimed that the 132 men he drowned were necessary because they were running out of water, although when they arrived in Jamaica they had over 400 gallons in reserve. The insurance company protested the loss and took the case to court, where, after hearing all the testimony, the Chief Justice said the ship's captain did no wrong because throwing the slaves into the sea was no different than if he'd done the same thing with a cargo of horses.

And into this culture, God called William Wilberforce to abolish slavery. But what is impossible from a human perspective is possible with God.

So this young legislator, being thankful God put him in the center of the government that influenced the whole world, boldly took on the most powerful economic engine of that day. In May of 1787 he made his first speech in Parliament calling for the end to slavery – and he was soundly rejected with many more defeats to come as the road blocks were overwhelming and relentless.

The impossible surely seemed just that.

Several years into his campaign to end slavery, with a long string of defeats behind him, Wilberforce was discouraged and close to giving up when he received a letter that gave him fresh hope.

The letter was from his long-term mentor, John Wesley, who was very near death. In fact, this letter was the final letter Wesley wrote, and in it reenergized the haggard Wilberforce with these eloquent words:

“Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be with you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God?”

O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery – the vilest that ever saw the sun – shall vanish away before it.”

With a fresh call of God through his friend Wesley, on April 18th of 1791, William Wilberforce took the floor of Parliament at 5pm to make, what he assumed would be his final attack to bring the legislative body to their senses and vote for change. After his four-hour speech and subsequent debate, at 3:30 am the vote was taken to abolish the slave trade -- 88 yes, and 163 no.

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And so, as God often does, He uses methods that surprise us to accomplish His desires. Instead of parliament, politics, and power, God used the arts to turn the impossible into the possible when—with a picture, a poem, and a pendent captivated English culture and turned the tide of public opinion.

The picture was a drawing of how on the slave ship Brookes, Africans were literally stacked into the hold of a ship for crossing the Atlantic, and the preciseness of the artwork shocked Londoners about cruelty of slavery.

The poem was from William Cowper, one of the most popular writers of the day, and his seven-stanza prose exposed the hypocrisy of a nation that calls itself Christian, allowing slavery.

*Is there, as ye sometimes tell us,
Is there one who reigns on high?
Has he bid you buy and sell us,
Speaking from his throne the sky?*

And a pendent showed the image of a kneeling African chained hand and foot, with the words “Am I not a man and a brother.” Being created by Josiah Wedgwood, who had founded a company on the cutting edge of quality china; it was especially popular and worn all over London long before anyone had thought of wearing ribbons to identify their cause.

God was making possible what seemed impossible from a human perspective, because the Lord opened their eyes, people saw the filth all around them and especially the abhorrence of slavery. And although the wheels of God’s justice do seem to grind slowly for us, but they always grind fine.

Over 20 years after Wilberforce was first called of God to this battle to end slavery, abolition passed the House of Commons. And three days later the one called to lead the fight, William Wilberforce died.

What is impossible from a human perspective is possible with God, and more often than not, God accomplishes his way through the least likely means – I think, so there will no question who should receive the glory.

As I read the biography of Wilberforce this summer, I couldn't help but think about Belhaven College trying to create an entirely new model for higher education within a culture that is not calling for change in how students are educated and sees no reason for faith and values being part of the educational process.

We are up against a complacency that has become blinded to the way higher education is enslaving the minds of the next generation – teaching them to understand the world with no consideration of who created it.

So in American colleges and universities this fall, the 15 million undergraduates enrolled will:

- have their courses taught by a growing army of faculty who will take joy in belittling the Christian faith and the cause of Christ.
- have all of their courses taught from a totally secular viewpoint because the law does not allow even Christian faculty to interject their faith perspective into the classroom discussion.
- not have a single course at a secular university this year will be founded in biblical truth.
- be taught there is no unchanging truth, and further will be taught that the mark of an educated person is not simply tolerance or acceptance of ideas, but that you must celebrate all perspectives as equally valid – except of course, Christian ideas.
- at secular institutions define spiritual success as creating what a national institute calls “safe spaces” for spiritual dialog – because no specific religion is promoted and all are accepted.

- not learn to understand how God designed and ordered the world and will not learn their discipline from a perspective of God's desires.
- not have an advisor counsel them to consider their calling or purpose through God's eyes. They will not even be taught the life lessons of the Bible, much less the reasons Jesus teaches us to live as He does.
- have few opportunities for school sponsored spiritual growth, although half the freshmen across this country report they are seeking opportunities to grow spiritually. And following the recent lead of Harvard, the faculty will reject any effort to put a meaningful study of religion into the curriculum even though students want to ask the big questions of life.
- not have faculty, residence hall staff, coaches, or other campus employees pray with them, except at the risk of a lawsuit, if they have a family member die, break off a difficult relationship, or is searching for a life directing answers this year, ,
- at secular campuses not be required to attend a chapel service, write a paper to articulate a Christian worldview, or take a course

on the biblical expectations of balancing the workplace and family. Any Bible course offered will be taught only as literature, and watched closely by the administration to assure it stays at that level.

- find their residence halls co-ed in many places, but in all, there will be no standards of propriety or sexual behavior. Binge drinking will be rampant. The language of the majority of coaches will be vulgar. And the vibrant pockets of Christian faith available on these campuses will be huddled in anticipation of the next attack.
- be taught to prepare for life, with absolutely zero perspective on eternal life.

Like Wilberforce facing a storm of culture against him, this is the culture of American Higher Education into which God has called Belhaven College to do the impossible.

UCLA research tells us that 52% of evangelical freshmen will lose their faith by the time they graduate. Or to play that number out, over three-quarters of a million freshmen students will have their faith broken by higher education this year by the very school they are trusting to prepare them for life.

And you know what bothers me the very most? The Church doesn't seem to care. And so evangelical parents and pastors continue to send our young people to these schools because of the prestige, cost savings, sports team loyalties, social connections, or tradition – and then turn right around and ask if there is any hope for our country?

Changing the American system of Higher Education seems impossible. But you know what -- so did abolishing slavery in 1780s England.

I don't know if God wants to lift American Higher Education out of the filth and muck in which it is stuck, but I do know our clear calling at Belhaven College is to create a new model of a Christ-centered college.

Like a small lamp burning in the vastness of the dark, God is doing something remarkable through this little college in Mississippi – what is impossible from a human perspective is possible with God.

Impossible vs. Possible with God

What we think is impossible, contrasted with what is possible with God, is shown so many times in the Bible, and one of the best illustrations is found in the story of Jesus walking on the water.

Right after Jesus fed 5,000 men, along with their families with only a handful of food, the Bible tells us in the book of Mark:

Immediately after this, Jesus made his disciples get back into the boat and head out across the lake, while he sent the people home.

Afterward he went up into the hills by himself to pray.

During the night, the disciples were in their boat out in the middle of the lake, and Jesus was alone on land. He saw that they were in serious trouble, rowing hard and struggling against the wind and waves.

About three o'clock in the morning he came to them, walking on the water.

As a framework for looking at this impossible challenge God has given us together at Belhaven to set a new pattern for what Higher Education should be, I would like to lift three contrasts from this story.

Let's look first at how it was impossible from a human perspective:

1) The disciples didn't anticipate the storm.

These disciples were not a bunch of naive guys who didn't know how to do things. They were smart sailors and fishermen. They understood the waters, they knew how to read every subtlety in the weather, and they knew how to handle a crisis on the sea. Their collective wisdom for how to control a boat in the worst of circumstances was about as good as you could get. These were real pros.

But they not only didn't see a storm coming that night, but Jesus sent them out there knowing that a storm would come. And I would assume they set off in full confidence that there would be no troubles ahead, because Jesus told us to go.

And we too, face impossible situations, not because we are unwise, inexperienced, or blind to our circumstances. But Jesus sends us out on the water, because he knows the storm is just where we need to be.

Two years ago we had a wonderful kick off dinner and the best start to a school year in all my years of doing this. But on that night, had we known Hurricane Katrina was coming just a few days later, we wouldn't have had our dinner or our normal start of school activities. We wouldn't have had our athletes on campus early, a big bunch of new people hired, or our buildings all painted up fresh. We couldn't have handled the anticipation of what was to come, had we known it on that night.

But neither on that night would we know that when all our costs of Katrina were added up, from damage, lost revenue, additional scholarships and all the other expenses, the total would be \$2,110,000. Just as we wouldn't have known that after we totaled up the special fund raising, the cost cutting, the government grants for our students and all the other income, it equaled nearly to the dollar our Katrina costs of \$2,110,000.

We are not failures because we don't anticipate every storm. Jesus knows what is always before us and will do the impossible when we trust Him.

2) The disciples felt very alone in the storm.

Jesus had sent them on this journey, and now, they were in big trouble. They were far from any land, it was dark, and they couldn't see where they were going; and although they were rowing hard and rowing together, I'm sure they felt abandoned in the middle of this storm.

It was a time when they desperately needed Jesus. But in their circumstances they didn't think there was any way He could help them, and they would have to get out of this with their own God given ingenuity, muscle, skill, and determination.

And this is exactly how we often feel at Belhaven, when the battles we face become overwhelming.

- We are swimming in a sea of college marketing that makes it seem impossible for us to get noticed.
- We are up against overwhelming competition from wealthy schools in Orlando, Houston, and Memphis.

- We have so few high worth donors, and so many needs yet unmet.
- We squeeze every nickel in the budget and know one major slip can put us into a deficit.
- We have a growing number of students coming out of high school under-prepared and short on motivation to learn at the college level.
- We are a tiny speck in the prestigious world of academia.

We often feel alone in the challenges we face as a College. But Jesus sent us into this storm of impossibility on purpose.

3) The disciples forgot who Jesus is when the storm came up.

These disciples had just spent the entire day hearing Jesus teach to (without a microphone) at least 15,000 to 25,000 people. And if the Sermon on the Mount is an illustration of what the PowerPoint was like that day, it must have been an incredibly inspirational time. The day had to be filled with life changing ideas and memorable gems of insight.

But not only that, when the crowd got hungry and had nothing to eat, Jesus had taken what little food they could find, prayed over it, and then used it to feed the entire crowd, and even enough for left-overs.

So by the time they got into that boat, this band of disciples were running high on emotion and understanding the remarkable nature of Jesus. And I'm sure well into their journey they were retelling each other the events of this amazing day.

But once they got into the storm and the wind and seas came up, they collectively forgot all they had seen, heard, and understood just a few hours before and they forgot who Jesus is.

Today, the future of Belhaven College is ominous – but then, the future is *always* ominous! When we look ahead at our challenges of enrollment, shifting adult markets, carving out a new online program, living with too tight of a budget, not to mention the complexities of every single student God brings to us, we say “yikes” because the unknown is always overwhelming. And looking ahead the storm seems gloomier than we've ever seen it before.

But this is not the first time we've crossed these waters in a storm. And when we remember how many times Jesus has come to us in the storm, we say "wow" as we recall how often He has turned the impossible into the possible.

From our human perspective, we can't see the storm coming, don't expect Jesus to fix the trouble, and we forget that He's done it many times before. But when the impossible becomes possible with God, we see this situation from a totally different viewpoint.

So now let's look at the same story from the perspective of how the impossible becomes possible with God:

1) Jesus prepared spiritually.

We usually measure our effectiveness in God's work by what we get done on our to-do list. But we see here, as Jesus did so many other times, spiritual preparation was critical before the next thing was attempted.

After a day of preaching and miracles, you'd think some time to just relax would be in order, but Jesus knew that time talking to His Father was what he needed most – showing us again how important prayer is to our lives.

How often do we get spiritually drained in our effort to do good things for God, and don't take the time to restore? More often than most of us would admit out loud I'm sure.

But if we expect what is impossible from a human perspective to become possible, we must put prayer and spiritual restoration before action.

I couldn't be more proud of our report this past spring from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. We had a little celebration two weeks before school was out, but the longer it sinks in, the more I'm amazed by the glowing report we received from SACS.

It really was impossible from a human perspective. Because to be as cutting edge as we are in the way we operate, have as much breadth as we cover in our programs, run as financially tight of operation as we do, and have a mission so counter the philosophical ideas of mainstream Higher Education, the SACS reviewers could have easily kept us in the straight jacket they have made us wear for years.

As I reflect on the process, amidst all the endless hard work, I think two unique things were going on during our 2+ years of preparation.

First, so many people were committed to prayer about the SACS effort. This was our entire future on the line, and we joined together to ask God to take it and give us His outcome. And as I told you in the spring, while I sure didn't like the very critical report of ten years ago, I was just as thankful for that bad report a decade ago as I was for this outstanding report now –because it was God's outcome.

That was what we needed then, and this is what we so need now to unleash our opportunities.

And second, there became a point in our process where we moved beyond making all the improvements and measuring our quality as a requirement in order to pass the test with SACS, but rather, to become the best we could for the glory of God. SACS may have been the tool God was using to structure us, but the Lord's measure was the only one that mattered in the end.

When the impossible from a human perspective becomes possible with God, it begins with spiritual preparation.

2) Jesus saw they were in trouble

The disciples got into a boat at the end of a long day to get to another town across the water. Jesus, tired and knowing his need for time in prayer, went the opposite direction up into the hills. The Gospel of John telling this story says that he was about 3 or 4 miles away from them. But when the storm came up, the scripture clearly records, "*He saw that they were in serious trouble.*"

In the middle of the night, from miles away, with a storm blowing so hard they were scared to death – Jesus saw they were in serious trouble.

The laws of physics apply to you and to me. But with a power that makes Google Earth on my computer look like a stick drawing, Jesus could see past all the limitations of the circumstances to look into their eyes.

MaryLou and I flew into Jackson late one night this spring, and one of the skycaps was our student – a senior football player. We didn't really need the help since the bags roll, but wanted to help him since he didn't seem to have any other paying customers.

We hardly got out the first few lines of small talk about the flight before we could see in his eyes that something was wrong. And like we had put out a hand to lift him out of a sinking pit, he told us how he missed a deadline in the registrar's office and had to tell his mother today that he wasn't going to be able to march in the procession and receive his diploma.

He said she cried, and he cried, because all his family had planned to come in for the big occasion, and now he had nothing to celebrate. I tried to figure out what the problem was, but maybe since it was after midnight, he wasn't too clear, so I told him to come check with me tomorrow.

In the morning, one short phone call to our registrar's office, who does such a wonderful job generously serving our students, while also protecting us on all our standards, figured out the problem, got a paper processed, and a cap and gown was ordered and ready.

And watching unfold the contrast between his overwhelming storm, and the easy solution it was for us, I thought of that great promise of Jesus, "If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him."

What seems impossible from a human perspective is possible with God because He knows when we are in trouble. And even while we are consumed with rowing hard against the waves, Jesus looks through the storms that surround us and is ready to act when the glory will go to Him – because the solutions are easy for him, even when the problems are overwhelming to us.

3) **Jesus invites us to the impossible.**

When Matthew records this story in chapter 14, he gives more detail about when Jesus came to them, walking on the water:

Then Peter called to him, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you by walking on water." "All right, come," Jesus said.

So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he looked around at the high waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted.

Instantly Jesus reached out his hand and grabbed him. "You don't have much faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?" And when they climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped.

Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!"

When the storms of life are the strongest, and we get a glimmer that Jesus is coming, we are relieved, surprised, and willing to do the impossible if he asks us. And so like Peter, we may not only be glad he is coming to our boat, but we may step out on the water with Him.

And we can risk the impossible WITH God, when we are completely focused on him rather than the impossible around us. And that is the difference. Jesus was doing the impossible walking on the water, and then Peter did too, UNTIL, *“when he looked around at the high waves, he was terrified and began to sink.”*

You know, I stay fairly optimistic about overcoming the impossible with God, that is, until the daily higher education news reports pops on my email about 5 o’clock every afternoon. And then I am reminded of the impossibility of the storm and how hard it is to keep up with other schools while also confronting the culture of American Higher Education.

Just this past week’s headlines included:

- Tarleton State University Receives \$8.2 Million Boost
- Universities Install Footbaths to Benefit Muslims
- U.S. Universities Expand Overseas Efforts to Keep Global Edge
- Presidential Candidate Calls For Free Community College

- University of Louisville Set to Build a \$2.5 Billion Health Science Center
- Massachusetts Governor Eyes Free Education
- Alum Wills \$6 Million to Ohio Wesleyan University
- \$200 million for new Catholic College to Teaching Orthodoxy

And like Peter, I can quickly get my eyes off Jesus, look at the storm around us, and start sinking.

But when I fix on Jesus, and only Jesus, there is nothing we can't do if we take hold of His hand as He invites us to the impossible.

Jesus didn't say to Peter, "stay safely in the boat and let me get this wind stopped first, and then it will be okay for you to step out." He didn't tell Peter, "better wait a while until the waves calm down before you take on the impossible." No, Jesus invited him to the impossible and abandon the last bit of security Peter felt in the boat to step onto the water with him in the middle of the storm.

Oswald Chambers says:

Let actual circumstances be what they may, keep recognizing Jesus, maintain complete reliance on Him. You do not know when His voice will come, but whenever the realization of God comes in the faintest way imaginable, recklessly abandon.

It is only by abandon that you will recognize Him.

When was the last time you accepted Jesus' invitation to attempt the impossible? If you can't remember, then it is time to get your eyes off the wind and waves, and recognize who has called you.

Called to the Impossible

Tonight I want to briefly trigger your thinking in three arenas where Jesus is calling us to the impossible.

1) We are called to the impossible together.

This summer at our annual meeting of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization held in Budapest, we had speak to us David R. Young, the managing director of Oxford Analytica, which works with the world's pre-eminent scholars to advise most of the top corporations, organizations and governments.

Even sitting in 98 degrees in the non-air conditioned hall of the historic seminary where we met, his analysis of the current global landscape was riveting. And he challenged us to do with our ministries what they do for nations and multi-national companies – to identify the stress points we face and rank them as to the impact each would have on our work.

For instance, he said that from their analysis of the world the top two threats are the possibility of Taiwan/China armed hostilities or a US strike on Iran. Their third and fourth most critical point of world stress is flu pandemic followed by a United States deep recession. The fifth most damaging threat is an oil price shock, followed by a state collapse in Pakistan, a return to protectionism, and the eight most dangerous treat is a dirty bomb.

So on the long flight home, I tried out his exercise and made a list of the stress factors that I believe could most harm Belhaven College – or strengthen us if they were resolved. And my priority rank order of what could damage or help us most, came out like this:

1. Adult and online enrollments
2. Student customer service/care/retention
3. The Church's lack of understanding Christian Higher Education
4. Pricing ourselves out of the Southern market
5. High School students not being prepared for college
6. An individual faculty member disrupting our cohesion
7. Some small problem growing out of control
8. Governmental limitations on hiring our standard of faith
9. An isolated racial incident
10. Hurricanes in Orlando, Houston, or Jackson
11. Security risks on campus
12. Moral failure of a faculty or staff member
13. The next advance of the University of Phoenix

When I look at this list and think about how to fix it or avoid it, the list seems overwhelming. But what is impossible from a human perspective is possible with God.

Now let me ask it more specifically – which of the challenges we face, or the needs we have, are too hard for God?

2) **We are called to the impossible, in our relationships with each other.**

To do the impossible with God it will take extraordinary working relationships.

It is not the waves outside the campus that make me fearful for our future, because God is controlling them. But if we are not good stewards of the relationships inside the campus, He won't calm the seas for us out there.

- I don't worry about our total agreement on mission, unlike 90% of the Christian Colleges who are still struggling over their mission focus.
- I don't worry about our theological commitments being clear and our theological harmony being strong, because somehow God has allowed us to know well who we are, but not be exclusive and judgmental in the process.

- I'm not worried about us capturing opportunities because we have the right people with the right gifts gathered at Belhaven, and we have a Board who understands the uniqueness of what God is doing here and is opportunity wise, without being restrictive.
- I'm not worried about the money, because with the recent changes we've made, we should be back on track soon with our revenue. And as He has always done, God will send us the special friends we need who can make gifts for the remarkable work of the Lord here.

What I do worry about is strained relationships that will hold us back. I think my concerns are justified because of how we have changed so significantly as an institution during the past several years:

- we've gotten so much larger and it is no longer possible to know every employee.
- we've become stretched with everyone doing more than a full time job as we handle the growth

- we're now so spread out that there are people here tonight some of you work with, whom you've never even met in person before because they work on a different campus.
- we've become more complex as the operational processes require more moving parts
- and we're had to be more fast paced because we are rowing against more storms.

When I evaluate the past year or so, I see our relationships trending toward being more strained, and that concerns me deeply. Because if a steady rain of tension creates trenches of mistrust that get too deep and create division, then barriers of protection don't follow far behind.

The excuses of personality quirks or pressure demands don't hold up for justifying strained relationships. And with SACS behind us, this is a very good time for us to take a refresher course in how the Bible instructs us to get along with each other.

You know, there may be some places where the Bible is not clear in its direction about what is the right thing to do, but relationships is not one of those places. The scripture says:

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Love does not demand its own way. Love is not irritable, and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged. It is never glad about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

When I look at all the issues that came to me during this past year, there are so many wonderful and creative things I get to work with, but on the tough side, they only come down to two issues – money or relationship tensions.

We have got to do better, not because I ask you to do it, but because it is biblical.

I'd suggest to us five guidelines for your relationships with each other and with students:

1) Get fixed what is already broken. If you have difficulty with someone now and you know there is tension, go get it fixed and don't be satisfied until it is fixed. If there is someone on this campus you can't work with because of tension, you are a poor steward of the gifts God has given you, unless you're willing to go work through it and get a fresh start with that person.

The best benchmark I know for evaluating whether a relationship is Godly is asking yourself if there is anyone you'd feel uncomfortable praying with? If I broke you up into prayer partners tonight, and your only prayer was, Lord, please help me to not get so-and-so, then you need to go work out the tensions with that person. And if they won't listen, then the Bible says, you take someone along to help mediate.

2) Listen until you really understand. Too much I'm seeing folks having to guess what others want or need, rather than having a relationship that allows them to hear the other person's heart and not just their words. When there is tension, there is more under the surface, and until you listen, until you understand what it is, you'll never grasp what they are really saying.

I had someone come to see me last year who was very aggressive about a situation that was in process, but when we boiled it down, the issue in their mind was really an attempt to rectify something totally unrelated from the current situation – which happened on a different campus 20 years ago.

Few tensions come to us in a vacuum.

3) Shoot straight with each other – carefully. We need a working culture that allows us to be open, direct, and transparent with each other. We need to be able to challenge, ask, and examine issues if we're going to get the best ideas out in the open.

But that means different things to different people. Some of you naturally have a 44-magnum style, so when you shoot it feels like a cannon and we don't hear you. Others shoot straight and it is so quiet we don't hear you either. We have to be trusting enough that we can work out differences directly with each other, but always in the requirements of I Corinthians 13.

4) Don't systematize relationships. The bigger and the busier we get, the more we are prone to creating systems so we can get more done. But in doing so, we are straining relationships – between employees at times and especially with students by creating systems to do what we should handle by just talking one-on-one.

We have a screened in porch at home that sounded great for keeping the bugs away, but the mesh collects every bit of dirt in the air. So I've been trying, without much success to keep it clean. I used my big gas powered lawn blower on it, but that mostly blew the dirt back into the screen so it could fall down again with the next rain. I got an outdoor vacuum, thinking that might help, but it clearly is not powerful enough for the job. So I rigged up a hose with a very high-powered nozzle on it and sprayed it clean, and it looked great until it dried, and then I saw it just moved the dirt around.

So this summer, I was considering what to try next, and I had a novel idea – I swept it with a broom. And it was the cleanest it's ever been. And in our relationships, we too can design all kinds of systems to try to make the work easier, but more often; we just need to stay with the basics of talking to people.

5) Don't start a weekend mad. Any good marriage counselor will tell you that one of the most important things you can do in a relationship is to never go to sleep upset at each other, even if it causes some late nights. Because if there was a deadline for resolving issues, nothing can build up for too long before you would have to deal with it.

But on a campus, you can have tension with someone for a very long time without resolution – and that tension grows to suspicion and then mistrust, then it doesn't take too long before your effectiveness is compromised.

But if you couldn't go home for the weekend without every tension being resolved, something tells me we would be a stronger community.

Working relationships are not easy. They take constant effort, attention, and time. But I know we could do much better than we are doing, if we would not be satisfied with anything less than the biblical definition of love.

And in the fierceness of the storm Belhaven College faces as we cross this sea of Higher Education, unless we are rowing *together*, we can't begin to expect Jesus to come to invite us to do the impossible.

3) **We are called to the impossible of balancing our ministry opportunities *and* our life demands.**

Every person here has a unique set of gifts and a calling you bring to Belhaven. Each one is important if God is going to do the impossible for us collectively, because sitting on the sidelines comfortably waiting for God to do the impossible for us as a group is not going to move us to the place the Lord has for Belhaven.

Instead, your personal calling needs to be so clear that you're willing to have God invite you to the impossible.

Stepping out of the boat requires we take unsure steps, and you need to be looking for opportunities for God to do the impossible with your calling gifts.

- The great artist Michelangelo often prayed, "Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish."
- Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade the largest Christian organization in the world, used to ask for a middle seat on the plane, so that he would have two people to witness to, rather than just one.

- Our Bettye Quinn, an elementary school educator has created an army of teachers, who love to see children learn because she has modeled what it means to serve.

Your calling doesn't move into the impossible unless you get out of the comfortable boat.

In what we do, it is very easy to be busy and pressed doing your work and adding value – but still never allow God to do the impossible through you, because you don't seek more than you can handle. Yes, we'll pay you if you fulfill the job description, but you'll never fulfill your calling from God if you're satisfied with only that.

To fulfill your calling, you need to know what it is, and then get past your comfort zone so that God can do the impossible.

But there are two sides to our ministry calling – and I don't think we talk enough about the second – and that is, balancing our calling with the demands of our lives beyond College responsibilities.

We are not NFL players who can block out everything personal to concentrate for 3 hours on game day. Because the Christian life doesn't

work that way – allowing us to compartmentalize our ministry from the rest of our life. You can't separate your work from who you are – whether that is joys or struggles in the rest of life.

God calls people, not institutions. And God calls people not just to a task, but a task within context of their complex lives.

- God called Moses to lead slaves out from under the control of the most powerful person in the world, but he almost didn't do it because of his insecurity about a speech handicap.
- God called David to be the greatest leader ever, but he diminished his effectiveness because of the tangled web of his personal life.
- God called Abraham and Sarah to have a baby when they were 100 years old to birth an entire nation, but instead they didn't want to wait on God and created a divided family.
- God called Paul to plant tiny churches that would eventually become the whole Christian Church, but his abrasiveness in relationships pushed away those who could have helped him to do even more.

- God called John to be alone in exile so he could see Jesus like never before, although I'm sure the loneliness was gut wrenching being away from the seven churches to whom he wrote in Revelation.

The balance of your calling and your personal life is something that only you and the Lord can figure out, but you won't be called to the impossible in one if you can't deal effectively with both.

I know that in this room tonight there are people who are under tremendous stress at home, nearly at the breaking point.

- Some are facing issues with children that consume you.
- Others are battling health situations that have you turned inside out.
- Some have financial pressures that overwhelm.
- Others have stresses that have brought you to the edge of being emotionally drained.

But God didn't call you to Belhaven College to do a job; He called you to the fullness of what your life has become. And he wouldn't have put you here to fulfill this challenge to attempt the impossible, if he also wasn't ready to do the impossible for you at home.

Step out of the boat, and fix your eyes on Jesus.

Conclusion

Now before I close, I know that leaders are supposed to stand up and say THIS is where we are going and there is no question about our direction. And sometimes, I've shared with you that type clarity for the next steps.

But right now, I'll tell you transparently – I don't know what tomorrow will bring.

Coming off the SACS evaluation, taking over Orlando and Houston, beginning an online program from scratch, launching a Master of Public Administration, forming a marching band, waiting to see if we can buy Bailey Magnet school, and all the other things that are in flux, we have about all we can say grace over.

So I don't know what tomorrow will bring.

But I do know:

- We must each be spiritually renewed if we are to be ready.

I do know:

- We must have solid working relationships that model Christ like love if we expect God to calm the storm of higher education that is likely to get worse before it gets better.

And I do know:

- We must each fulfill our individual calling and balance that ministry with all else God brings to our personal lives, if we are going to do this together.

When Peter stepped out of the boat, the scripture tells us:

Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he looked around at the high waves, he was terrified and began to sink. "Save me, Lord!" he shouted. Instantly Jesus reached out his hand and grabbed him.

We don't know what storms tomorrow may hold, but we know who holds tomorrow, and we know who holds our hand.

And if we are going to step out of the boat, with the storm blowing around us, we have to trust in the character of God to save us when He reaches out His hand.

And it is while holding His hand, what is impossible from a human perspective becomes possible with God.

In a moment Dr. Dolphus Weary, our friend, board member and President of Mission Mississippi is coming to dedicate this school year to the Lord, followed by our traditional singing of Bless Be the Tie that Binds, lead by Dr. Chris Shelt.

But before they do, I've asked Derrick Burt to come sing a song I haven't been able to stop singing to myself for months.

I tend to often pray through the songs I listen to, and this one, started as we faced many questions leading up to SACS. As I've watched some of you go through some very difficult challenges at home this past year, I continue to pray it. And as I reflect on our future and the storms all around us as a College I pray it even more.

Like the disciples, Jesus sent us off in this boat together and told us to go to the other side. And so as its been, every other year of our journey, I'd expect this year will hold some great surprises when Jesus invites us to the impossible and seas are calmed. And there will be other times when new challenges come up to make the storm seem stronger than ever.

So in both the highs and lows of the year ahead – on campus and at home - this is my prayer for you, and for me.