

Message to Ohev's College Students and Personal Testimony

by Michael Rudolph

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A few weeks ago I was privileged to deliver a message to a gathering of Christian students and their parents from David Harris' graduating class of West Springfield High School. Upon reflection, I came to realize that what I had to say to them is equally crucial for the college students and college-bound students here at Ohev to hear and there are additional things I want to say. Realizing that this is a holiday weekend and that some, or even many of our young adults may be absent from today's service, I nevertheless decided to give this message now, and ask that a recording of it be delivered to everyone who needs to hear it who is not here.

In June of 1957 – 53 years ago – I sat amidst my Stuyvesant High School graduating class in New York City. My thoughts were of college and of my professional future, and I was blissfully unaware that I was already moving along a path that would eventually take me away from believing in God, and that would dramatically affect my values and my consequent future life.

My early religious upbringing was influenced by my Orthodox Jewish grandparents, and I received *Bar Mitzvah* at age 13 in a local Orthodox synagogue. My mother was not religiously observant, but she deeply believed in God, and it was mainly through her that I acquired my own early belief in God. But by the time I was looking forward to entering college, I was no longer attending synagogue, and God was already not part of my conscious thoughts as I looked forward to studying science, mathematics, and everything else technical that I could get my hands on. What I did not realize was that I was approaching a point of major decision – a fork in the road of my life where one branch would lead me to return to God and godly values, and where the other branch would lead me in the opposite direction. I took the wrong road.

I didn't see it coming. There was no one crucial moment when I chose against God. What happened was that, during my early college years, I became enamored of intellectual pursuits and especially the scientific method of determining what is true and what is not. Ever so subtly, I bought into the notion that if a thing could not be seen, could not be felt, could not be tasted, could not be smelled, or could not be measured with a scientific instrument, then it didn't exist – and if anyone thought it did, then they – not I – were deceived. This rationalistic view of the world that crept up on me was strengthened by college professors who promoted humanistic philosophies and, as I considered myself way smarter than those who, in their weakness and insecurity, needed to believe in the fairytale of there being a God, I was soon calling myself an atheist. In telling you this, I am not faulting higher education, college professors, or intellectual pursuits. I am faulting myself for not being sufficiently discerning; it was I who allowed myself to be led astray.

I remained an atheist through my college years, through several years of graduate school, through law school (by then I had changed my professional direction), and well into my law practice. Then, one day in 1976, for no reason that I deserved, God sent a Christian believer to speak to me about God and "Jesus." I figured that he was one of those weak ones who needed God as a crutch, so I was polite and let him have his say. After all, if he was so needy and

limited in his understanding, why should I, the epitome of enlightened intelligence, pull the rug out from under him?

What happened then can only be explained as a miracle of God. As the man was speaking, I became cloaked by a powerful presence that I now know was the *Ruach HaKodesh* – the Holy Spirit of God. It captured my attention to the degree that I stopped listening to the man and turned my attention to what was happening to me. I can only describe it as a tactile force field, and this atheist instantly knew that God was real and present, and that He had sent this man to tell me the truth. It took God a week and a second powerful visitation to convince me that Yeshua is, in fact, *Mashiach* –the savior who is prophesied in the *Tanakh*, and described in detail in the *B'rit Chadasha*.

This happened when I was 37 years old, so I had spent the last eighteen years of my life ignorantly denying the existence of God (and by extension the Messiah as well), and all the while believing myself to be ever so smart. And all this because I allowed myself to be wrongly influenced by worldly educators during my college years.

I am telling you this in the hope that you will remember what happened to me, and will avoid making the same mistake. Some of you young adults will be going to college and some of you may be entering the work force. In either case, you are approaching that same fork in the road as I did, where secular worldly influences, masquerading as enlightened thought, will try to derail your faith. I do not expect that any of you will lose your belief in God totally as I did, because you have been correctly taught and are initially stronger in your faith than I was. Nevertheless, God wants me to tell you with certainty that you have the power to stand against those influences if you keep to the truths that are in the Word of God, and only consider other sources that do not contradict it. In this way, you can take from the world what is good, and true, and godly, and reject that which is not.

There are other ways as well, that students can be led astray while in college. Whether we remain at home and attend a local college or move away to attend a more distant college, it is, for most of us, the first time that we experience adult freedoms where our comings and goings (as well as our conduct) are not observed and regulated by our parents. It is an exhilarating and for some a scary experience, but for all, it is conducive to temptations and experimentation that can lead to excesses and to sin. There are many ways that this can happen, but a leading one is to become drawn into college social life to the extent that we forget the reason we came to college in the first place. Depending upon the college, late night and every night parties, alcohol, drugs, sex, and numerous pleasures upon which to spend money are often there for the taking, and parents are not there to warn us that they will lead to educational failure and moral ruin. You can even encounter such temptations at Christian colleges (where you would think you would not), but at least there they are officially disapproved of by the school administration (which is good), but are driven underground (which is bad).

I consider the Book of Proverbs to be a college student's most valuable guide for keeping him on a straight path. Proverbs 1 starts this way:

“The proverbs of Shlomo the son of David, king of Isra'el, are for learning about wisdom and discipline; for understanding words expressing deep insight; for gaining an intelligently disciplined life, doing what is right, just and fair; for endowing with caution those who don't think and the young person with knowledge and discretion. Someone who is already wise will hear and learn still more; someone who already understands will gain the ability to counsel well; he will understand proverbs, obscure expressions, the sayings and riddles of the wise. The fear of ADONAI is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.” (Pro 1:1-7 CJB)

You see, it even announces itself as a tool for gaining and maintaining personal discipline which is more than half the battle. Having the Book of Proverbs at your side is next best to having God at your side to carry you through the things you will encounter; Proverbs 4 speaks to you as a father when it says:

“Listen, children, to a father's instruction; pay attention, in order to gain insight; for I am giving you good advice; so don't abandon my teaching. For I too was once a child to my father; and my mother, too, thought of me as her special darling. He too taught me; he said to me, "Let your heart treasure my words; keep my commands, and live; gain wisdom, gain insight; don't forget or turn from the words I am saying. Don't abandon [wisdom]; then she will preserve you; love her, and she will protect you. The beginning of wisdom is: get wisdom! And along with all your getting, get insight! Cherish her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will bring you honor; she will give your head a garland of grace, bestow on you a crown of glory. Listen, my son, receive what I say, and the years of your life will be many. I'm directing you on the way of wisdom, guiding you in paths of uprightness; when you walk, your step won't be hindered; and if you run, you won't stumble. Hold fast to discipline, don't let it go; guard it, for it is your life.” (Pro 4:1-23 CJB)

Proverbs 20 also has much to say to students; here are a few examples of how it can help:

- When you are at a party and the suds begin to flow, remember this: *“Wine is a mocker, strong liquor a rowdy; anyone led astray by it is unwise.”*
- When a professor gives you a lower grade than you think you deserve, remember this: *“Avoiding quarrels brings a person honor; for any fool can explode in anger.”*
- When you don't feel like getting out of bed to attend an early morning class, remember this: *“A lazy person won't plow in winter; so at harvest-time, when he looks, there is nothing.”* and also: *“If you love sleep, you will become poor; keep your eyes open, and you'll have plenty of food.”*
- When you have not studied adequately and are tempted to cheat on an important exam, remember this: *“The character of even a child is known by how he acts, by whether his deeds are pure and right.”* and also: *“Food obtained by fraud may taste good, but later the mouth is full of gravel.”*

- When you have someone’s ear that will listen to you vent idle stories about your neighbor, or he has yours, remember this: *“A gossip goes around revealing secrets, so don’t get involved with a talkative person.”*

There is no time to say everything I want to about college, but I will go just a bit further. Proverbs 22:6 instructs us this way:

“Train a child in the way he [should] go; and, even when old, he will not swerve from it.”
(Pro 22:6 CJB)

This Scripture sometimes puzzles us because we have seen children who are properly taught go astray. The answer is that, for the outcome to be as promised, the child must not only receive training, but must actually become trained during childhood; his values and patterns of behavior must take hold early in his life or the biblical promise for his later years may not come to pass. Now you know yourselves better than I, but it seems to me that Ohev Youths are generally trained in the way they should go and, for the most part, have absorbed their parents’ wisdom and adopted their godly values. The happy result is that you have a good head start as you go off to college, having many biblical patterns in your lives already established – patterns such as these:

- Having regular quiet times with the Lord.
- Fellowshiping with believers.
- Reading Scripture regularly.
- Maintaining respectable conduct with those of the opposite sex.
- Keeping the Sabbath.
- Attending weekly services.

I encourage each of you to make a list now of these patterns that are already a part of your life, so that when you are in college, you can periodically check yourselves against the list and determine if you have slipped back from anything. I can tell you right off that slipping back is easy, and that many students do it. Faced with new demands on their time, relative freedom of choice, and the responsibility of setting their own priorities, the personal disciplines of prayer, keeping the Sabbath, and attending weekly services are among the first to go. Students have even been known to opt out of spiritual life entirely while in college, and begin to lead a dual life – a secular one on campus, and a more spiritual one during visits back home. This is not as likely at a Christian college where there is a biblical supportive culture, but even there you are able to choose what you do with your time, and with whom you hang out.

Now I will address a problem that is ironic because it involves an over-doing of what is otherwise good. Many colleges – particularly the secular technical ones – make little or no allowance for their students to spend time on anything except study. Spiritual life and the time it takes to maintain it is completely off the radar of these schools, as students are pushed to the limits of their academic endurance. My undergraduate college bragged about its policy of admitting more freshmen than it could graduate and I experienced the dean’s orientation speech in which he said with gusto: “Look to your left, look to your right. By the time of graduation, one of you won’t be here.” And it turned out that he was right.

Because I was not a believer at the time, all that concerned me was making sure that I was not one of those who fell by the wayside. However, since becoming a believer and subsequently an educator and a pastor, this all-encompassing expectation on the part of schools has come to trouble me more and more. And the pressures do not necessarily end at graduation because there is a culture of expectation that often follows the student into his secular professional life, and many institutions that employ lawyers, doctors, executives, and the like, are notorious for requiring that their young professionals give their entire lives to their work – even to the detriment of their families.

It took me both years and prayer to arrive at an answer to this – an answer that should have been obvious and now is. It is embodied in these Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 6:17-19 (NKJ) *"You shall diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, His testimonies, and His statutes which He has commanded you. And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, that it may be well with you, and that you may go in and possess the good land of which the LORD swore to your fathers, to cast out all your enemies from before you, as the LORD has spoken."*

Romans 12:1-2 (NKJ) *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."*

1Corinthians 15:58 (CJB) *"So, my dear brothers, stand firm and immovable, always doing the Lord's work as vigorously as you can, knowing that united with the Lord your efforts are not in vain."*

The solution is to stand firm in God and do what is right and, if necessary, bear the consequences. The student who is a believer needs to be prepared to say "no" to the school, the employer, or anyone else, when directed to by the Lord. Now for a young person with goals set on doing well in college and in future professional life, it is a formidable thing to say "no" to someone who can affect his future. But that is a cross that a believing student must bear.

2 Corinthians 6:14 (NKJ) warns us:

"Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?"

This Scripture is often thought of as applying to marriage, but it also applies to the believing student who chooses to study at a secular institution of higher learning. The Scripture does not prohibit his attending such a school – it prohibits his allowing himself to be yoked into doing what is not pleasing to God. The student can insulate himself from some of this by carefully choosing the school he attends in the first place, but options are often limited. Once in a school however, a believing student needs to always keep in mind that he or she is in the Lord, and

should try vigorously to negotiate around school demands that are inconsistent with doing what is right. Failing that, however, he must stand firm in the Lord.

I want to say one more thing, although there is much more to say. You are a member of Ohev when you move away to college, and you remain so while you are there. Because of that, Hebrews 13:17 applies to you when it says:

“Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

This is speaking of the elders of Ohev and, by extension, your *chavurah* leaders, with whom you are biblically required to remain accountable even from across the country. They remain responsible for watching out for your souls, which is for your protection. That is a good thing. I confess and apologize on behalf of Ohev’s pastoral leaders, that we have not done enough, earlier, to make ourselves more available to our students before they leave, and while they are away. I am asking all of us now, both students and leaders, to rectify this. Students, identify an elder, an elder’s wife or *chavurah* leader with whom you relate well, and make arrangements with him or her to communicate regularly, share your ups and downs, and receive counsel and prayer. Leaders, press in on our young adult students to whom the Lord leads you, and offer yourselves for counsel and prayer.

Attending college is a great adventure in which we want no mishaps. My prayer for you, our Ohev’s students today, is that your college years will contribute to your walk with God in the years to come, and that He will say of you then: “Well done good and faithful servant.”