

***Consider Others – Philippians 2:1-4***

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It was thirty-four years ago that I was in a similar position as this weekend's graduates—glad that the final academic tasks had been completed and that the pomp and circumstance had finally begun.

Do any of you remember the 1970s show, "The Love Boat"? It was on Saturday nights, right before??? "Fantasy Island." One of the characters on "The Love Boat" was named Gopher, if you remember, sort of a squirrely, goof ball member of the ship's staff. Gopher was played by a guy named Fred Grandy, who grew up in Sioux City, Iowa. Well, Fred Grandy (after "The Love Boat") got into politics and was elected to Congress representing the northwest Iowa district where I lived.

So, guess who the commencement speaker at my high school graduation was in 1988? Gopher. I remember nothing he said in his speech. I just remember the gym was hot and he spoke too long.

Following that ceremony in 1988, my family hosted a graduation party for me at our house. And it included a number of guests, including many of my high school teachers.

One of those teachers that came that night was my football coach and his wife. He was a man who cared deeply for the kids he taught—would go all out for the interests of his players. And his wife was a very kind woman. I was glad they had come.

After the party was over, I was opening all the graduation gifts that the guests had brought. There were pictures in nice frames capturing special high school memories, there were devotional and inspirational books, there were gifts certificates, and of course there was cash.

One of the last gifts I opened was from this coach of mine and his wife. It was a rather small box. It contained no picture frame, no inspirational book, no gift certificate, and no cash. Inside the box

were three metal, heavy-duty...clothes hangers. Oh boy! Graduates, this weekend, beware of gifts that help you organize your closets.

This is the weekend to give graduates gifts, because we are celebrating them. They've earned the accolades that so many will toss their way over the next couple of days. They are to be congratulated for their achievements inside and outside the classroom.

To the graduates we're celebrating today, I hope you will take the time to reflect on all the good things you have made happen for yourselves. The world we live in will tell you that your future success will be determined by your continued individual achievement. Whether it be college or work, your level of happiness and contentment in the world will largely be due to what you make of yourselves.

Let me offer, however, another perspective on success and happiness—another way of living that might be just as rewarding as the one our culture tells us is the best.

And it's actually quite simple. It involves moving the spotlight off you and onto somebody else. Paul's letter to the Philippians offers some sound advice. In chapter 2, verses 3 and 4, the apostle Paul writes, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Again, this weekend is for us to celebrate the accomplishments of the many graduates walking across the stage to get their diplomas. But I would venture to guess that they could not be celebrating their accomplishments if somebody else hadn't taken the spotlight off themselves and turned it onto them.

Somebody, most likely many people, put their students' interests ahead of their own. And because they did that, these graduates have arrived at this point of celebration poised for even greater things in their futures. Teachers, coaches, advisors, and administrators in some way considered them better than themselves.

And because of their commitment to them, we are celebrating these graduates' achievements today.

My guess is that those who sacrificed for them—who looked to their interests in addition to their own—are finding in this weekend a kind of fulfillment and sense of accomplishment they could not have found by living any other way.

The world we are living in today is aching for more humility, for more consideration of others and for less selfishness and conceit. It is looking for more people to consider other people's interests in addition to and even ahead their own.

Several years ago, a man named Mark Lemke, an Iowa truck driver, lost his nineteen-year-old son Cory in a motorcycle wreck.

Lemke had written to Sports Illustrated magazine shortly thereafter to nominate his son for a spot in their "Faces in the Crowd," a section of the magazine that focuses on the accomplishments of high school athletes. (Young Cory had set all kinds of golf records in high school before he died.) And Sports Illustrated did published Cory's story in a future issue of the magazine.

A couple of months later, Mark Lemke got a phone call. On the other end, the voice said, "Mr. Lemke? It's Tony Dungy." (Tony Dungy was at the time the head coach of the Indianapolis Colts.) Lemke figured the call was a joke.

"No, it *is* Tony Dungy," the voice said. "I'm just calling to offer my condolences to you and see if there's anything I can do to help."

Dungy was dealing with his own grief. His own 18-year-old son, James, had taken his own life just before Christmas in 2005. Lemke remembered this. So, they talked to one another, and the coach told Lemke to keep in touch.

"And pretty soon they developed a bond. Dungy's life at the time was pretty full—a wife, five kids, the monster coaching job, numerous charities he worked with and a thousand things to do, yet he took the time to answer every Lemke email, gave him his cell phone number and returned every call.

“Then came the playoffs that year, and Dungy would apologize for not replying to Lemke right away. ‘Sorry about not getting back to you,’ he emailed Lemke one day. ‘Sometimes I can go a few days without getting on my computer, especially if our defense isn’t playing well.’”

“And Lemke was only one stranger whom Tony Dungy has befriended over the years. There’s the former high school coach in Wisconsin whose son committed suicide. There’s the young kid in Indianapolis who lost his mother and brother in a car wreck. [As Rick Reilly of Sports Illustrated wrote,] heartbroken people all over are suddenly getting a hand up from a man who himself should be a puddle but is instead a river of strength.

“‘I’m awfully grateful to him,’ Mark Lemke said. ‘He helped me keep my faith. He taught me that he and I—we’re not alone.’”

Despite his fame and success—success he no doubt helped to secure through his own talent and hard work, Tony Dungy had accepted the Biblical mandate to consider others’ interests in addition to his own. And in doing so, he provided hope and support to another grieving father. His success and happiness were grounded in more than winning football games; they also were based on being humble and serving others.

As all graduates move on to new phases of their lives, our world could be the recipients of a precious gift from them. By being humble and selfless, they and all of us can be the models for a greater camaraderie and dialogue that all of us should embrace. Through an emphasis on listening and serving others, people of all generations might see how our world can benefit from greater caring and compassion. And then, all our legacies will be great.

Earlier, I mentioned that teacher of mine who gave me the clothes hangers as a graduation gift. Well, all these years later, long after the knickknacks have gotten lost and the gift certificates and cash have been used up, do you know what remains? In my closet at home are those three, metal, heavy-duty clothes hangers. The pants that hang on them have changed many times, but that graduation gift

remains. And in that gift's lasting durability is a reminder to me of that coach and teacher who gave them to me. Maybe when he and his wife chose that gift they were thinking, "This is something he'll be able to use for a long time."

They were right. Not only have those clothes hangers remained, so has his contribution to my life, his willingness to give of himself so that I could achieve so much. That is a meaningful life.

Once, an old Cherokee was teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It's a terrible fight and it is between 2 wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good—he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith. This same fight is going on inside you and inside every other person, too."

The grandson thought for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

Which wolf will each of you feed—the one of arrogance and superiority or the one of humility and kindness? Graduates, your best days are ahead, and with your selflessness and service, so are the world's.