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“For such a time as this” Bible Verses for Law School Deans



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From August 23, 2005 through June 30, 2006 I served as the interim Dean of the Law School of the University of Arkansas. It was not a position that I sought;¹ it followed from the premature and sudden death of my friend and thirty year colleague Dean Richard Atkinson.²

During my brief tenure I had the support of all the obvious parties – the faculty, the staff, the students, the University administration, the Bar Association, our alumni. But I soon learned that the most valuable support arose from my wife Katherine, to whom I came home and unloaded law school details, and who said I had never talked so much; and

even more importantly, from the Lord God Almighty. I acknowledge God’s Sovereignty and seek His guidance on a daily basis.³

During the year, as I dealt with a variety of law school issues and problems, I believe that, directly or indirectly, God brought Bible verses to mind. Despite the occasional footnote, I make no pretense that these thoughts are scholarship, either legal or Biblical. They represent, in essence, my journal entries⁴ as I went through the year. Looking back through these incidents has been rewarding and instructive for me. Perhaps my journey may encourage you.⁵

¹As I told alumni in presentations, “for 30 years I had treated the Dean’s office as fourth graders treat the Principal’s office – it is a place to avoid, nothing good ever happens there.”

²See *Faculty Tribute*, “We lost the one who would know what to say,” 2005 ARK. L. NOTES i.

³See Howard W. Brill, *The Christian Lawyer: Seven Distinguishing Marks*, 2001 ARK. L. NOTES 137.

⁴The format for these notes was suggested by Joseph Allegretti, *A Lawyer’s Miscellany: Scriptural Resources for Christian Lawyers*, 26 FORDHAM URB. L.J. 1183 (1999).

⁵For a broad collection of personal thoughts on the relationship between religion and the law, see the Symposium Issue, *Faith and the Law*, 27 TEX. TECH L. REV. 925-1427 (1996).

- 1) "And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" Esther 4:14.

During the captivity of the Jewish people in Persia, King Xerxes rejected Vashti and following a competition selected lovely young Esther to be his queen, not knowing that she was Jewish. As the evil prime minister deceived the king into believing that the Jewish people had a conspiracy to kill him, the future of the people was at stake. At this point the aged counselor Mordecai, who had played a role in the selection of Esther as queen, went to her and demanded that she intervene; she at first refused. Only upon his further plea and his reminder of her position and her ascent to her position, did she act.

We tend to go through our lives in a self-centered cloud, oblivious to other needs and problems and then something jars us; something tells us we are here at this time and at this place for some purpose. The Christian says God has put me here for His purpose. Accepting the sovereignty of God, it is not for me to ask why am I here, but to ask how should I use this sudden position to serve Him? Can this position bring glory to Him? The opening sentence of the Westminster Confession teaches that "the chief end of man is to glorify God."⁶ The believer walks through life with that objective.

- 2) "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" Psalm 118.24.

During the first weeks, the entire law school felt overwhelmed by the tasks ahead, the death of Dean Atkinson, the necessity of quickly beginning a national dean search, the faculty recruitment process, the emotional loss. Outsiders would ask how we were doing and wonder how we would survive the year. I spoke of the challenges facing the law school during the year. But by early September I realized that such a discouraging mood and tone was destructive. An interim dean cannot be a mere caretaker.⁷ I resolved to speak of opportunities, not challenges; to look ahead to September 2006 with a new building, with new faculty members, with a new dean, with new momentum.

From a Christian perspective, no matter where we had been, no matter what issues were coming in the door, no matter what frustrating bureaucratic problems needed to be addressed, I had been given this new day on earth. Arriving at the law school each day was to be a time for rejoicing. In David's Psalm, he was surrounded by enemies, the nations blazed like a fire of thorns; he was in distress. But, while calling to the Lord for deliverance, he treated each day as a blessing. In the same fashion, we, whether we teach or administer, judge or counsel, are to treat each new day as a gift from the Lord and to respond accordingly to whatever challenge or opportunity walks in the door.

⁶The Catechism of the Westminster Confession (1648).

⁷See Michael D. Sabbath, *Should You Accept the Position of Interim Dean? Some observations from someone who did*, 36 U. Tol. L. Rev. 159 (2004).

BIBLE VERSES FOR LAW SCHOOL DEANS

- 3) "The Lord has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death." Psalm 118:18.

At the end of the first month of my deanship, I doubted whether I would survive to a second month. In a brief throwaway comment to a colleague, I uttered unkind and hurtful words. Sadly, and perhaps revealing my own heart, I did not recognize the severity of my transgression. Only when he properly brought the incident to my attention did it dawn on me what I had done. For several days I frankly dreaded and feared the meeting that I had requested. Acknowledging wrongdoing is not easy for me; asking forgiveness is not a pleasant assignment. The healing of the rift, I believe, is taking place and must continue.

- 4) "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." Colossians 3:23.

Most of the work as Dean was rewarding and enjoyable and enriching – working with student organizations and groups, meeting with alumni, presenting the needs of the law school to others, shaping the agenda of the community, recruiting new students, interacting with the administrative staff, representing the law school to the Arkansas Bar and legal community. But I did not enjoy the reports and the committees and the turf battles and the national issues of legal education. I had to remind myself on a daily basis that I was the dean for all purposes, not only for the ones I chose.

It became easier to do that when reflecting on Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. He addressed husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves. His words are equally relevant to deans and professors, attorneys and judges. "And whatever you do, in word or

deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."⁸

- 5) "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to Him who judges justly." 1 Peter 2:23.

Faculty governance includes free wheeling and open discussion of curricula needs, teaching styles, standards for promotion and tenure, law school organization, the law school's role in the broader legal community and other pertinent and relevant concerns. But the spirited, yet genteel nature of faculty discussions can change suddenly when the topic of religion enters the colloquy. A reference to the views of a particular sect or denomination can make the mood divisive and unpleasant. In one instance I left a meeting disheartened because religion had even been raised. That evening the First Peter verse reminded me that regardless of temporal treatment, the believer has the assurance of God's eternal sovereignty.

- 6) "He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin." Proverbs 13:3.

I early learned that a dean's comments can easily spread through the building with ramifications both constructive and destructive. When I openly shared with the faculty my opinions on the role that adjunct faculty should play in our teaching package, I had people coming to me to clarify their status. When I mentioned to a few individuals a possible administrative rearrangement, the word spread and people came to apply for a position that did not exist. But words of criticism or scorn could easily reverberate, with

⁸Colossians 3:17.

sudden impact. I had to learn to listen, more so than ever before, and be even more careful about committing myself. The Proverbs of Solomon warn of the dangers of the misuse of the tongue and encourage us to seek God's wisdom.

- 7) "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up." 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

As I was leaving a law school function one January evening, I asked a colleague what special activities he had planned for the weekend. His response: "Well, Howard, I probably would not feel comfortable telling this to many others, but I am accompanying a group of teenagers. We are going to Little Rock to participate in the pro-life rally." It was encouraging to know I was not alone in my opinion. In separate interchanges one colleague shared with me that he and his wife had been chosen for a special role and honor in his church. Another colleague, while agonizing over a career decision, spoke of personal and family prayers for guidance.

Law schools frequently are lonely places for professing Christians. To realize that I was not alone in seeking divine direction and trying to pursue Godly causes was particularly reassuring. The New Testament epistles remind us to "accept one another,"⁹ "be honest with one another,"¹⁰ "confess your sins to one another,"¹¹ "forgive one another,"¹² "have fellowship with one another,"¹³ "be patient with one another,"¹⁴ "admonish one an-

other,"¹⁵ and "pray for one another."¹⁶ Within the legal community believers belong to one another in a unique and eternal way.¹⁷

- 8) "Then neither do I condemn you, Jesus declared. Go now and leave your life of sin." John 8:11.

When the Pharisees brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus, He dared them to throw the first stone. But despite his protection of her, he did not condone her sin. Some aspects of contemporary culture are anathema to the Christian. Some of those aspects are protected by statutory law; some must be tolerated in an open and free society; some are even promoted by the molders of popular culture. In today's society, while sin may be acceptable, denunciation of sin may be scorned as bigotry. I struggled with my response to conduct that I considered inappropriate, wrongful, or sinful.

Some issues were easy. I made a unilateral decision to cancel hard liquor at law school functions. Only one person complained, perhaps no one else cared. Other issues were more difficult. I agonized how to walk the line of accepting and respecting each person, without expressing approval of conduct. I remembered the statement reputedly made by Clarence Darrow, when defending Leopold and Loeb in the Bobby Franks murder case: "I may hate the sin, but not the sinner." The Gospels reveal Jesus reaching and ministering to all, and that is to be our model.

⁹Romans 15:7.

¹⁰Colossians 3:9.

¹¹James 5:16.

¹²Ephesians 4:32.

¹³John 1:7.

¹⁴Colossians 3:13.

¹⁵Colossians 3:16.

¹⁶James 5:16.

¹⁷Romans 12:5.

BIBLE VERSES FOR LAW SCHOOL DEANS

- 9) "See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction." Isaiah 48:10.

In March a student violated the law school's standard of conduct and left the law school. As I met with him, I remembered this verse, which an undergraduate dean had used with me when I was on the other side of the desk more than four decades ago. The difficult times teach us, instruct us, shape us, mold us, purify us. It is extraordinarily difficult during those times to look beyond the grief or the punishment or the anguish. But the trust of the believer in the ultimate sovereignty and grace of God permits an eternal perspective.

- 10) "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Matthew 5: 14:16.

As law school representatives, Katherine and I attended a community event, with hundreds in attendance honoring a business leader for his service to the cause of diversity. After the accolades and the tributes, he rose to offer a brief response. I was stunned at the frankness of his comments: my faith teaches me; our company is built on New Testament principles; the Lord is Lord of all; everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved;¹⁸ in Jesus there is no Jew nor Greek, no male or female.¹⁹ What a statement; what public visibility. I left the evening impressed

by his willingness to be so open with his evangelical beliefs. Like the speaker, we all need to look for opportunities to be the city on the hill, to encourage others, to light a lamp.

- 11) "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." James 1: 19-20.

In the Spring semester I made a decision, in accord with the position of prior administrations, not to fund a particular student activity. The fallout was enormous. I struggled with the belief that I was unfairly accused. After my initial dismay, I wanted to respond with my complete version of the decision making process and the correctness of the decision. I wanted to tell people, in a casual way of course, why I was right and the students were wrong. But caution prevailed; nothing would be gained from such rash action; it would be better to be silent and to attempt to correct any actual or even perceived wrong.

- 12) "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." Matthew 5:5.

The law school depends on the roles of those behind the scenes. Those who write the articles, stand in front of students, speak to alumni, appear in the media, receive the attention and the fame. But the work of those who type the exams and answer the phones and clean the offices and copy the books is just as important. Their gratitude for their positions exceeded that of the faculty. That became most evident to me one day in December. In the morning I received a Christmas card from

¹⁸Romans 10: 12-13.

¹⁹Galatians 3:28.

a member of the physical plant staff, with a handwritten note, "Thank you for letting me work in your building." In the afternoon a faculty member informed me why he should receive a higher salary. The contrast between the demands of the afternoon importuner, already being paid by Arkansas taxpayers at a rate multiple times that of the morning worker, and the gratitude of the custodian was stunning.

During the remainder of the year I sought to find ways, intangible and hopefully tangible, to recognize those who provide those valuable and essential services. In the legal profession it is sadly too easy for the power and prestige of deans and faculty, lawyers and judges, to go to our heads. We must strive on a daily basis to recognize and acknowledge those whose work makes our positions possible.

13) "He brought them to their desired haven." Psalm 107:30.

In the last week of my deanship, as I thought back through the year, I realized how the Lord had answered prayers and provided protection. What I had feared had not come to pass – the confrontations were avoided, the tasks accomplished, the programs presented, the budgetary decisions made, the moral issues circumvented.

It turned out to be a much more rewarding and fulfilling year than I had expected. A year in which I learned a great deal about myself, the law school, the necessity of support staff, and the providence of God. I was, and am, thankful that I had the opportunity to serve.