"IF MEN WERE ANGELS":
THOUGHTS ON THE CROOKED PATH TO VIRTUE

Remarks at Hampden-Sydney College Baccalaureate
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Good afternoon, everyone. Let me start by congratulating you graduating seniors. I hope that this weekend will be a time in which you feel affirmation and a sense of accomplishment, but also a deep sense of gratitude, and I encourage you to reach out to the family members and friends and teachers and professors who have encouraged and supported and shaped you along the way and be intentional about thanking them.

I am thankful for the opportunity—for the privilege—to talk briefly with you graduates today. As I have thought about doing so, one question has been on a repeating loop in my mind. It comes from an anthology of "liturgies for everyday life" titled *Every Moment Holy*—essentially a collection of prayers for life's mundane moments. In the "liturgy upon taking the stage," the author suggests a prayer that opens with this haunting question: "What have I to offer here that might sustain the souls of others?" You should know that that question has shaped my prayer for this afternoon. I know that almost no one remembers addresses like this, and I'm OK with that, and yet I pray that something I share today—for some of you in this audience today—will be soul challenging, soul nurturing, soul "sustaining."

Toward that end, let me think out loud with you for a few minutes about the mission of Hampden-Sydney College. I have known *of* the college most of my adult life, yet I have known very little about it, and so I was much struck when I opened the college website and read on the home page this bold proclamation, "Forming Good Men and Good Citizens since 1775." Mottos such as this can be profoundly meaningful when we first formulate or encounter them, but they can lose that impact over time as they become familiar to us. At worst, they become an empty cliché; at best they reflect a commitment that we genuinely endorse but have come to take for granted. I'm certain that's a perpetual possibility at my own institution, which has the motto "For Christ and His Kingdom." Keeping that pledge fresh and alive requires frequent revisiting and regular rededication.

So, as an outsider to Hampden-Sydney College, let me share with you some of my reactions to the college's mission. My hope is that, in seeing that mission through my newcomer's eyes, you might see it anew yourselves. Along the way, I want to call your attention to what I see as unique and valuable in it; I want to ask you an important question about it; I want to alert you to something in it that could be dangerous. (In the hope of holding your attention, I'll save that for last.)

Let's begin with what is unique and precious, starting with the commitment to form "good men." This bespeaks an intention to shape *character* that is rare in higher education today. In thinking about this, I went back and looked at the website of my first employer after I finished graduate school.

Before coming to Wheaton College, I taught for twenty-two years at the University of Washington, a large research university that is in many ways fabulously resourced: Its sixty thousand students can learn from three thousand faculty members, choose from among 180 majors, study and conduct research in the seventh largest academic library in North America, and leave with a degree from an institution routinely listed among the top twenty-five universities in the world. But when you look at their website, although you'll read much about innovation and exploration and problem-solving, I defy you to find even a shadow of a whisper about character.

In this sense UW is not extraordinary but distressingly typical. American culture has an impoverished understanding of what education entails. In our pervasive pragmatism, we think of it as a marketplace exchange in which students pay educators for knowledge and skills that will equip them to contribute to the economy and earn a living for themselves. This is education as *transaction*. But true education is not transaction. Its essence is *transformation*; it changes who we are, and Hampden-Sydney aspires to educate in this truest, fullest sense.

I appreciate also the emphasis in the Hampden-Sydney motto on forming "good citizens." This is rare as well, and at a time when that is critically needed. It will be news to none of you that we gather at a time when our country is profoundly polarized politically. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that American democracy is in crisis. Over the last generation, popular confidence in American institutions has plummeted, distrust of one another has soared, and disillusionment with democracy itself is mounting. In survey after survey, one fourth to two fifths of us claim to be open to a form of government characterized by "a strong leader who does not have to bother with Congress or elections." The technical term for that form of government is dictatorship.

In this context, Hampden-Sydney's commitment to form "good citizens" may be the most important, most needed contribution that it can make to the United States today. If you have embraced that vision, if you seek to rise to that high calling, that is a laudable ambition, and I applaud it.

This leads me to the pressing question that I want you to consider today. Given that true education changes us, given the college's mission to "form good men," I feel compelled to ask this question of each of you: Are you, today, a ***good*** man, prepared to be a good citizen? . . . Are you, indeed, good? It's not a rhetorical question. I don't want you to answer out loud, but I do want you to answer that question silently to yourself—right now. Undoubtedly, it's a deep question deserving of much more extended reflection—for the rest of your life, actually—but I do wonder, what was your immediate response?

I can imagine a range of ways that you may have answered that question to yourself, but in the interest of time I will speak to one possibility only. It's the one that scares me most, the one that I'm here today to warn you against. I have in mind the simple response, "Yes, I am a good man." I've come here today to channel a host of voices that would warn you against such a conclusion.

I think first of the leading founders of the United States, the statesmen who, two and a half centuries ago, set out to forge a republic—a thing of the people—grounded in the revolutionary principle that government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed.

Those men generally believed that human beings naturally possess a moral sense that gives them the potential for reliable moral discernment. Without that belief, their commitment to forging a

republican government made no sense. They believed that that moral sense imputes a precious dignity to each human being and, in tandem with the rights bequeathed to humankind by their Creator, gives human beings a privileged and exalted place in the created order.

And yet, these same men would tell us, emphatically, nearly unanimously, that none of us is naturally good. I take the title of my remarks today from the writing of James Madison, "father of the Constitution" and, not incidentally, one of the first trustees of Hampden-Sydney College. "What is government itself," Madison famously asked in *Federalist* #51, "but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

Almost to a man, the Founders agreed with Madison that we are not angels, more specifically, that we are not naturally inclined to ***virtue***, a pattern of behavior that they defined as self-denial for the public good. Listen to a sampling:

> **James Madison** lamented the "self-love" that is "sown into the nature of man"
> **Patrick Henry** (another trustee) confessed to "dread the depravity of human nature."
> **George Washington** concluded that "self-love" and "self-interest" are the motives that "predominate in human affairs"
> **John Adams** lamented the extent of moral corruption "among all ranks and degrees of men."

It is true that the Founders constantly exhorted citizens of the new republic to exercise virtue, but they never assumed for a moment that such denial of self-interest comes naturally. In fact, the constant inclination of our hearts was perpetually in the wrong direction. Jefferson likened virtue to a muscle that required continuous exercise to avoid atrophy, while Abigail Adams instructed her son that virtue was like a stone that must forever be rolled uphill to combat its "continual tendency to roll downhill." In sum, from their perspective, a complacent confidence in one's goodness was a red flag, an indicator of a debilitating lack of self-awareness—what I would call spiritual blindness. And so, they believed that the first step to behaving virtuously was to recognize that it comes naturally to none of us.

We might hear a similar if not identical warning from the Presbyterian Christians instrumental to the founding of Hampden-Sydney 250 years ago. The Judeo-Christian tradition that the college still seeks to honor offers us a language for thinking about human nature and the crooked path to virtue that overlaps and reinforces what the leading founders would say to us today.

Two concepts are key. The first is the concept of ***imago dei***. The Hebrew Scripture teaches (following Genesis 1:27) that we are created in the image of God. We occupy a unique place in God's created order. The Psalms tell us that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14), that God has made us "a little lower than the angels" and that He has "crowned us with glory and honor" (Psalm 8). We bear God's image in several ways—we possess an eternal soul, the faculty of reason, and a "capacity for moral goodness." There's a precious dignity in our status as God's image bearers. C. S. Lewis captured this well when he observed, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry . . . snub and exploit."

The second relevant concept is the doctrine of ***original sin***, and it tells us something very different about the human condition. This doctrine teaches that we have rejected God's rule and thus defaced the divine image we each bear, marring though not obliterating it entirely. Since the disobedience of our first parents—traditionally referred to as "the Fall"—each of us enters the world as a natural rebel against our rightful ruler. Fifteen centuries ago, the African bishop and theologian Augustine of Hippo captured the essence of the concept, observing that each of us comes into the world with two overarching, overruling propensities: recalcitrance (bristling resistance to rightful authority) and concupiscence (sinful desires). While we are capable of admirable individual acts of compassion and generosity and kindness and courage, our nature is to love ourselves and please ourselves.

So why are these doctrines important? What difference might it make if we embraced them? I can think of two ways: First, in terms of our inner lives, they save us from two equal and opposite tragedies, two ditches on either side of the road, either despair and self-condemnation, as we realize that, in our own strength, we cannot meet our own moral standards, or arrogant self-righteousness, when we deceive ourselves into believing that we can. They point us instead to a third way, a life of humble hope grounded in the simultaneous realization of our need for grace and hope of grace.

Second, I think these reminders can have a major impact on your mission to be good citizens. I spoke earlier of the extreme polarization that plagues America's public life today. Certainly, our nation needs more citizens, both leaders and followers, who are committed to honesty and integrity and fairness in public life. But the crisis of our time requires more from us. Nearly a century ago, the American poet laureate Archibald MacLeish warned that the erosion of democracy does not originate with physical violence, but with a gradual degradation of "the unseen sayings of the mind." Foremost among these, I am convinced, is how we see ourselves, and how we see one another.

In our poisonous political climate, the internet and airwaves resound perpetually with Us vs. Them stories churned out ceaselessly by an "outrage-industrial complex" that manipulates our emotions and profits from our anxieties. The details vary, but the plot line is simple and monotonously repetitive: our lives would be better off if not for Them. Embedded more deeply is a more ominous sub-plot: We are Good—They are not. Put differently, in the stories that reverberate throughout our culture, we implicitly but routinely deny that original sin applies to Us and that *imago Dei* applies to Them. In the process, it teaches that our most pressing problems can be solved while leaving our hearts unchanged.

In the middle of the last century, the Russian dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn pointed to a different way. Writing about his experience of eight years' imprisonment in a Soviet Gulag, Solzhenitsyn shared how his hatred for a sadistic guard gradually morphed into the realization that he himself might be equally cruel if their places were reversed. Over time, that humbling insight led in turn to this famous epiphany. "Gradually it was disclosed to me," he wrote, "that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart."

Graduates, as you prepare to take the next step in your life's journey, I do hope that you will leave with a sense of accomplishment and affirmation and gratitude, but above all I hope that you leave knowing the truth of Solzhenitsyn's dictum as it applies to every human heart, most especially your own. May God go with you.