

Tape Transcription

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Well, thank you for that. Good morning. Let's try it again this glorious day. Good morning.

RESPONSE: Good morning.

I am very grateful to be in this beautiful place, thankful to the graduates for the opportunity to address you on this great occasion. Our theme is called "Building Global Justice," or We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For.

To begin with the story from another occasion where I was speaking, not a great baccalaureate at a major university but to the inmates at Sing Sing Prison in upstate New York. The letter came, it sounded interesting, I wrote back and said sure, when would you like me to come? The prisoner, a young man the age of many of you, wrote back and said, "Well, we're free most nights." (Laughter.) He was a comedian. "We're kind of a captive audience here, whenever you'd like to come." It sounded good so I went and the arrangements were made. Eighty young men, in a room down in the depths of that prison. I met with them for four hours. Some of them were students, like you. They were studying to be ministers, Masters of Divinity inside the walls. Soon they would graduate, meaning their sentences would soon be over. Of course, none of you feel that way. I'll never forget one of them said to me, though, he said, "Jim, we are from, all of us, just about four or five neighborhoods in New York City. It's like a train begins in my neighborhood. You get on that train when you're nine or ten years old, and that train ends up here at Sing Sing. When I get out," he said, "I want to go back and stop that train." His statement was one of faith and hope, the kind that is desperately needed today from graduates of Sing Sing, or of Stanford.

When I was growing up in my Christian world, I was told the greatest battle of our time is between belief and secularism, but I now believe the real struggle is something different. The choice in our time is between cynicism and hope. It's a spiritual choice, but one that has enormous political consequences.

Hope is not a feeling. Hope is a decision, a decision made on the basis of what you believe at the deepest levels, what your convictions are about the world and what the future holds. You choose hope, not as a naïve wish but as a choice, with your eyes wide open to the realities of the world. Those realities today as we stand here in this place, are almost half the world close to three billion people now live on less than two dollars

a day. More than one billion live on less than one dollar a day, and every single day, thirty thousand children die needlessly from utterly preventable causes—hunger and disease and things like unsafe drinking water, things that we could change if we just decided we really wanted to.

For the first time in history, we have the information, the knowledge, the technology and the resources to bring the worst of global poverty virtually to an end. What we do not have is the moral and the political will to do so.

Now comes Gladwell and his best-selling book *The Tipping Point* talks of how an idea, a product, a behavior moves from the edges of a society to broad acceptance, consumption or practice. Along the way there is a tipping point that transforms a minority perception into a majority embrace. I believe, that the spiritual communities of the world could provide the tipping point in the struggle to deal with global poverty. The most astute political observers, religious or not, understand now that this will probably be a change in our moral sensibilities.

Gordon Brown is the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Great Britain. He spoke just a few months ago to a group of faith communities. He spoke of how the U.N. millennium development goals in the crucial areas of education, health and targeted poverty reduction are not being met, are falling short. These commitments 147 nations have signed, finally, are falling short. As to the causes, Brown said this: “Let us be clear. It is not that the knowledge to avoid these infant deaths does not exist. It’s not that the drugs to avoid infant deaths do not exist. It is not that the expertise does not exist. It is that the political will does not exist.”

The eighth century prophet Micah is my favorite prophet of global security. He says this: “The Lord shall judge between many peoples and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore, but, but, they shall sit, all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees and no one shall make them afraid. Micah is offering us a practical, prophetic, political wisdom. He’s saying we will not beat our swords into plowshares—in other words, remove the threats of war and violence and even terrorism—until people can sit under their own vines and fig trees; in other words, have some share, some stake in the global economy.

Pope Paul VI said it this way, many years after Micah: “If you want peace, work for justice. If the tremendous gaps on the planet could be leveled out just a little bit, the possibilities of peace would expand enormously. Poverty is not the only cause of terrorism. It’s more complicated than that, with roots that are also religious, cultural and ideological, but unless we drain the swamps of injustice in which the mosquitoes of terrorism breed, there will be no defeat of terrorism. Micah is pleading with us: Go deeper. The resentments, the angers, the insecurities, the injustices embedded in the

very structures of our world today, until people own their small stake in the world, their little patch upon which to build a life for themselves and their families, none of us will be secure.

There are modern day Micahs about in the land. One of the most famous friend of mine – you might have heard of him. He’s the most famous rock singer in the world, the leader of the Irish band U-2. Bono is now an informed activist about Africa, HIV AIDS. He’s in Washington a lot and he spoke recently at a dinner, Africa dinner to about fifteen hundred of my city’s elites. Bono said, “Excuse me if I’m a little nervous. I’m not used to speaking to less than 20,000 people.” And here’s what he said to them. “See you’ve been doing God’s work, but what’s God working on now? What’s God working on this year? Two and a half million Africans are going to die of AIDS. What’s God working on now? I meet people who tell me it’s going to take an act of God to stop this plague. Well, I don’t believe that. I think God is waiting on us to act. I think God is on his knees begging us to act, to turn around this supertanker of indifference.”

Waiting for us, says Bono, recognize the distance between our neighbors is now short. We can’t choose our neighbors anymore. We can’t choose the benefits of globalization without some of the responsibilities that Bono love thy neighbor is not advice; it’s a command.

Gordon Brown, Bono, a chancellor and a rock star and whole generation of young people across this country are all speaking in the prophetic tones of Micah. I am convinced that global poverty reduction will not be accomplished without a spiritual engine. History is changed by social movements that have a spiritual foundation. This will be no different.

So, to the graduates, you are a bright, gifted committed group of students. There are probably many people today who will tell you about your great potential, and they are right. You are people who could make a real contribution, to a movement for global justice. In that regard, I would encourage each of you to think about your vocation more than just your career, and there is a difference. From the outside the two tracks may look very much alike, but asking the vocational question rather than just considering career options will take you much deeper. The key is to ask what you might, why you might take one path instead of another. The real reasons you would do something more than just because you can. The key is to ask who you really are, and what you want to become. It is to ask what you believe you are supposed to do. Religious or not, I invite you to consider your calling more than the opportunities presented to the graduates of Stanford University. It means connecting your best talents and skills to your deepest values, making sure your heads are in sync with your souls. Don’t go just to where you’re directed or even invited, but rather to where your own moral compass leads you. And don’t accept others’ notions of what is possible or realistic. Dare to dream and don’t be afraid to take risks.

You do have great potential but that potential will be most fulfilled if you follow the leanings of your conscience, and the language of the heart more than the dictates of the market, economic or political.

Some tell you, you ought to know, manage the systems of the world. What a waste that would be of your talent. Don't just manage or merely fit into systems. Ask how you can change them. You're smart and talented enough to do that, and that's your greatest potential.

One of the best street organizers I ever knew was a woman named Lisa Sullivan. She was a young African-American woman out of the streets of D.C., my hometown of Washington. She went to Yale, she got a Ph.D., she could do whatever she wanted. When she went back to her home streets, her home turf, her home neighborhoods, because she was compelled by the young urban youth who had won her heart, with unusual intelligence, entrepreneurial skills, she created a whole network of youth organizing projects, but at 40 years old, Lisa died suddenly of a rare heart ailment that broke all of our hearts. Her legacy continues now in the young people she's mentored and cared for, but whenever somebody would say we don't have leaders anymore, where are the Martin Kings now, Lisa would get very angry and she would declare these words. She'd stand up and she'd say, "We are the ones we have been waiting for."

Lisa's words are your commission today. It's a commission learned by those of faith and conscience who've been used to build movements of justice. It's a commission that's quite consistent with the virtue of humility. It's not about taking ourselves too seriously, but rather taking the mission seriously. It's a commission that can be only fulfilled by very human beings, people who act because of faith and hope and believe the world can be changed. If not us, if not you, who else? What is possible? The eleventh chapter of Hebrews says this: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, of things not seen." Or my paraphrase of that for you on this day is this: Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change."

Stanford graduates, you are the ones we have been waiting for, and let's give Micah the last word, something to take with you as you leave this place and begin the rest of your journey. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice. Love kindness, and walk humbly with your God."

Thank you, and God bless you.

(Applause.)