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What Does it Matter to You?

A Sermon to New Students

By

Samuel Williams

Vance Packard states in a little booklet called *Do your Dreams Match Your Talents* that "first you need a sense of purpose. It will inspire you to dedicate yourself to a search for excellence. It will fire you with aspiration. It will provide the meaning you search for when you sit down in moments of quiet and ask yourself what the day-to-day tasks, disappointments, and joys add up to. If your life isn't dedicated to something of value—something that has lasting meaning—then it is likely to be a little more than a shell." Emerson said on one occasion that "the revelation of thought takes men out of servitude into freedom." It is my belief that these two statements, individually or when taken together, are not only suggestive for our theme, but emphasize those things that really matter.

What does it matter to you as to who you are, as to what you do, as to what your goal is, as to how you act, as to what you say, and as to how you think?

There is a real thrill in thinking for yourself or making up your own mind. I wonder how many Freshmen were free to think for themselves as to whether Savannah State College was the college of their choice. Did their parents make the decision for them? Did their brother, sister, friend, neighbor, another student, recruiter, alumnus, or none of these decide for them? Or, did it just happen to them?

Yes, thinking for oneself is a real thrill. It is something like going swimming in the ocean for the first time, or diving from the highest diving board into the deepest part of a swimming pool. It takes courage, fortitude, and determination, especially if one's swimming is no better than mine. One will have to focus all of his forces for the plunge. But it is worth it. When that first, rather awful impasse is over, there is a wonderful joyous response to the cool water pumping energy and bliss through his body. In a few minutes, he wonders why on earth he lived so long without that delight.

There is an equal thrilling delight similar to swimming in a pool of cool water when one makes up his own mind. Of what a joy one experiences from being his own decision maker.

Why, then, should one do without the superb thrill of making up his own mind, or thinking for himself? It is surprising how few of us ever know that exquisite sensation. Probably most of us think that we do make up our own minds, when the truth of the matter is we are only parrots. Most of our opinions are canned, packaged, pre-baked, pre-digested, and highly advertised.

What do you suppose would happen if, when next you hear one of your friends make a very positive statement, you say, "Is that your own opinion or is it merely an acceptance of what you have read, heard and been told, with no weighing of the facts on your part?" Your friend may be a little insulted. On the other hand, he might be that rarest of persons, a completely honest individual, and might surprise you by saying, "I do very little independent thinking. I'm not a real person. I am just a carbon copy of all the positive assertions I've heard. I am a bundle of prejudices and pre-conceived notions mixed with suggestions from propaganda and a warped sense of values." It would be refreshing to meet such an honest person, for at least he would be aware of his complete dependence upon others for his opinions.

When I urge you to taste the joy of making up your own mind, it is not merely for the sensuous experience and the wholesome strengthening that will result from each considered decision, but chiefly it is a warning. *If you do not think for yourself, somebody else will.*

There will be many occasions other than the academic ones here at Savannah State College that will require you to think for yourself, and, if you fail to think for yourself, there will be much shame and sorrow, for you, your parents, and your friends.

Of course, you have opinions about Savannah State College, about some faculty members you have heard of, you have allegiance to your home and community and we hope eventually to the College, and you have conclusions about persons you have met and some experiences you have had; but are they truly your own or were they crammed into your mind when you were not looking?

This very minute, the one you are living now, this very instant, impressions gathered at various times are sinking deeper and deeper into convictions. Are you doing anything to be sure that they are what you want? Are they your own choice?

Or are you like a hypnotized person doing whatever he is told? Did you ever see a hypnotist having his way with a mind he had subjugated? It is possible for the suggestions given a prostrate mind to be good, but usually, they are quite ridiculous. You, too, may have heard audiences roar with laughter when the poor victim obeys the order to "bark like a dog, run around on all fours, ask for a bone." It is not funny to have deliberately given over one's power of personal decision.

We know that in every suggestion of the ordinary and extraordinary influences that we meet every day, every night, sound and color partially shape our opinions. You must decide whether you are to be simply a sum total of your environment or a person who preserves his natural right to independent thought.

If a man uses his individual power of thought he is almost a god. But many people are no more than sheep following the paths of least resistance. Sheep and some men have something else in common.

Sometimes a sheep becomes caught in brambles or a barbed-wire fence. He will stand there and starve instead of pulling away with a decisive wrench. Men who do not exercise individual decision, but merely drift with the tide, may spare themselves a little exertion, but they throw away the thrill of meeting the challenge of life, of breasting its clean winds as adequate persons. They are old who seek too much comfort and inaction. They are young, no matter what their years, who want to know for themselves the first hand thrill of coming to grips with life as individuals capable of making decisions for themselves.

Mental drifting is about the worst menace that can creep upon you insidiously. If you do not exercise your mind, it will get creaky and rusty. And one day you may call upon it, and it will have forgotten how to respond.

One way to break a man is to reduce him to indecision, to flabby, undirected thinking, to bring him to confusion and diffused force. And the way to destroy a man is to reduce him to the status of a thing. We have seen examples of this in our society and our own experience, for these are the evils of segregation and discrimination. Certainly, none of us should drift willingly into this State.

If at times you should let other people make up your mind for you, in selfdefense you should decide to let them do it! Do not let too many things "just happen" to you here at Savannah State College. Even deciding not to decide for yourself has a cleansing effect on the corroding impediments of indecision and flabby thinking or no thinking.

Mental action that is independent brightens our faces, lifts our shoulders and gives us direction, but drifting stagnates the mind; it gives us characterless bodies and faces and makes shallow opportunists out of even potentially strong young persons like yourselves.

What does it matter then to you as to how you think? I have warned you that if you do not think for yourself someone else will. But I must also warn you that as you think for yourselves, put a little gadget on your mind that will permit you to give your thought a turn. I say this to you because many of you have come with preconceived thoughts as to what college life is like, how free you ought to be and how free you ought not be. Some of you are going to be disappointed, surprised, pleased, and perhaps neutral, so be sure that there is a gadget on your mind so you can turn it when need be. When what you have thought in the past becomes overshadowed with the truth of the present, you will need to think for yourself so you can accept the truth for what it is. When what you have believed about God, and man, and thought, and you study philosophy and religion and come to realize that there is a brighter light than that which you hold, though it shakes the very foundation of your life, let not your mind be so set, that you cannot turn the gadget to accept the brighter light.

No matter what group you may join here at Savannah State College, social, academic, political, religious or other organizations you

may become affiliated with, you will not be much good to them unless your opinions are your own. You will be just a weak, easily influenced person, really rather dangerous to have around.

What does it matter to you as to what your values are? It seems incredible to us today that Manhattan Island was bought from the Indians for a few strings of bright-colored beads and a few coins, total cost twenty-four dollars; It is easy now to see that the Indians were so excited about the pretty colors of the beads, so delighted with the vision of themselves impressing other members of the tribe with their new ornaments, that the small price paid was scarcely noticed by them. Today, college life offers attractive details for which you are supposed to pay great and deep values. You should watch for the cost to you not only in dollars, but in integrity, character, respect, citizenship and personal respect.

Sometimes the price you must pay is stated so vaguely that it seems to be nothing worth mentioning. Even when it is mentioned it is spoken of contemptuously. One can imagine the traders saying to the Indians, "and in exchange for these magnificent beads, all we ask for is just that old island over there, which you ought to be glad to get rid of."

When the people who are offering you something start talking so worthlessly of the price you must pay, just think the matter over quietly for yourself. There would be no point in running down something that had no value. Much of what is offered at Savannah State College has genuine worth. There are values that should be salvaged. But on the other hand, there will be some personal matters over which the College has no control and it will be childish for you to gobble the whole matter and then condemn the entire community.

It is difficult to judge immediate values. They are so deeply personal, so close to the moment's desires, that we cannot weigh them properly. Think through to the ultimate value, look ahead to the long-range result. The ultimate effect can be envisioned much more clearly. And do not forget that the immediate view may be purposely colored by exaggerations or mis-statements in order to confuse you.

However, there is confusion enough without anyone's trying deliberately to confuse. If you listen to many discussions of world affairs you find that you must ask those involved to define their terms. To clarify the meanings of words is important and, even *Black Power*, *Freedom Now*, *justice* and *equality*. Sometimes people will argue an entire evening only to discover later that they were in agreement, but had merely tripped over terminology.

A very naughty, stubborn little girl was being reported to her father. His face grew grave when he heard of her misdeeds. The little girl was bold until she heard him say quietly, "Well, I guess we'll just have to tolerate her." The child's eyes grew large with terror. She threw herself in her father's arms sobbing religiously, "I'll be good, father, I'll be good! Please don't tolerate me! Please don't tolerate me!

In his "Dimension" on radio, Harry Reasoner made the following splendid commentary on democracy. A listener at a gasoline station said, "seems like he talks more for the Democrats than he does for the Republicans. What's he talking so much about democracy for?"

Yes, there is enough confusion in the world, international, national, and local. But what does it matter to you as to what your values are? What does it matter to you as far as your concern for public property? Is it all right to destroy it because you did not purchase it directly, you did not ask for it directly, it is not yours directly? On the other hand, do you see property private, public or otherwise as a means of enhancing noble and high purposes for the good of all mankind? Your respect for property somewhat reflects your sense of value as well as what you want.

You should be careful as to what you want, for you are very likely to get it. There is an old Scotch saying, "just give a woman what she wants, and it will be punishment enough when she gets it." What most of us do not seem to realize is that we really have what we want—that is if we have the choice to choose, and if we want what we have chosen from day to day. If you choose not to study then you automatically choose to flunk; if you choose not to read then you automatically choose to stay uninformed; if you choose to violate the law, moral, civil, or otherwise, then you automatically choose the consequences of breaking the law.

A recent issue of *The Christian Century* contains the story of a dean of students at one of our nation's large universities, concerning a young man who spent much of his time studying female anatomy by Braille method. Every time the dean looked out of his window he looked into the young man's library. It was his hope that the young man would change his place of study as well as become more discreet in his behavior. However, there was no change. So the dean decided to give the young man a semester break in the middle of the semester. He contended that he was not interested in destroying the young man's love life, but he got tired of stumbling over the young man every time he left his office to go home.

What do you want in this desegregated age? It would be enlightening for you to make an appointment with yourself in the mirror and have a hear-to-heart talk about it. What is your idea of your chances? What is the material from which you will fashion your wants? Do you feel equal to the challenge of the uncertainty that lies ahead? Do you feel calmly confident that there is a basic element within you that is elastic, resilient, adaptable and resourceful?

In this age in which we live, it is not enough for you to want to be principals, teachers, and maids in inferior schools! You should be getting ready to be heads of superior boards of education as well as superior schools. Do you want a mouthful of civil rights and a hungry stomach? It is not enough! It is not enough to be able to go to some of the splendid hotels and motels in your country. Some of you should be getting ready to be managers and co-managers, and

owners of some of the great and splendid hotels and motels in our country. No, it is not enough to be able to fly from Washington to New York in 29 minutes, or from Chicago to Savannah in an hour and a half; some of you ought to be getting ready to fly that jet. No, it is not enough for you to play baseball with the Atlanta Braves, the Dodgers, and the Giants. Some of you should be getting ready to be managers and owners of teams in every area of professional sports.

So we see that what a man wants and his response to these wants has a bearing upon his values. The same is true with what or how a man believes. Does it matter what you believe? A whole generation of Protestant Christians have begun to wonder whether their Christian beliefs are really important. Since God is dead, the church is dead, the city is dead, and now there are some who contend that sex is dead. No wonder why there is a tendency to say: living the Christian life is obviously important, but believing the Christian faith? . . . well, we're not so sure. Yes, what a man is counts — definitely; what man does is crucial; but who cares what a man believes?

Belief is essential to life. Therefore, you should organize your life around the dynamic center of your being and believe in that which brings meaning to your life. The old Anglo-Saxon word "belief" literally means "what men live by." Out of the head are the issues of life. As a man thinketh in his head, so is he. Belief, by definition, is that conviction which conditions decision. It motivates action. It makes me what I am; it impels me to do what I end up doing. You have heard and perhaps have been guilty of making the following statement in an unguarded moment: "It doesn't make any difference what a man believes so long as he is sincere." If he believes the wrong thing, the more sincere he is, the more dangerous he is. Yes, it makes all the difference in the world what a man believes.

Here is a prosecuting attorney. He is examining potential jurors. It is a murder case and he intends to ask for the death penalty. The first question he addresses to every prospective juror is, "do you believe in capital punishment?" The decision that the prospective juror eventually will be called upon to make will be absolutely conditioned by what he believes, and the prosecuting attorney knows it. He knows that if he has a person on the jury who does not believe in capital punishment, he might as well knock his head against a stone wall as to ask that juror to vote for the death penalty, no matter how guilty the man may be proved to be. It is only a matter of belief, but it literally settles the case for the juror, the attorneys, and the prisoner at the bar.

Jesus Christ came into the world with a special, unique revelation of the will and love of God and the first thing he said in public was: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand—God has entered into human life, his grace and power are yours for the taking; repent, and believe." Of many communities in Jesus' lifetime ministry, it had ultimately and tragically to be said, He did not do many mighty works there. Do you remember why? Because of their unbelief?

What we believe about God makes a lot of difference to us, to the world of men lost and afraid, and to God himself. Our souls' sense of security in time and in eternity and the future of God's Kingdom upon earth depend upon what you and I believe. Yes, our thoughts, our values, and our beliefs are things that really matter. The truth of the whole matter will become meaningful to your life when you can answer the question for yourself, "What do my thoughts, my values, and my beliefs matter to me?"