

THRIVING AT COLLEGE

- ✓ Make Great Friends,
- ✓ Keep Your Faith, and
- ✓ Get Ready for the Real World!

Alex Chediak



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Thriving at College: Make Great Friends, Keep Your Faith, and Get Ready for the Real World!

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Advance Praise for *Thriving at College*

“Most Christian young people go to college without specific goals and are unprepared for the challenges that await them. While some prosper spiritually, most get derailed, and an alarming number abandon their faith. Alex has written an insightful and useful book to help college-bound people know what to expect, how to prepare for it, and what to do to avoid the pitfalls.”

RANDY ALCORN, best-selling author of *Heaven*

“Written by an ‘insider’—a former student, now a professor—this book addresses all the issues a student might face. It will be an excellent gift for all high school seniors.”

DR. JERRY BRIDGES, best-selling author of *The Pursuit of Holiness*

“College represents one of the most strategic transitional moments in the lives of most young Christians. In this book, Alex provides good wisdom and sound, practical advice to young Christians seeking to navigate the world of higher education while simultaneously maturing into faithful Christians.”

DR. R. ALBERT MOHLER JR., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Writing from the perspective of both a parent and a professor, Alex presents a practical guide on how students can spiritually and intellectually thrive during their college years. This book will be required reading for all three of my children.”

TULLIAN TCHIVIDJIAN, senior pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church

“*Thriving at College* is a significant how-to volume to help new college students and their families prepare for and adjust to the numerous transitions that accompany the college experience.”

DR. DAVID S. DOCKERY, president of Union University

“Many in my generation look back on their college years with regret, wishing we had been more intentional and focused during our time on campus. Before you invest four years of your life and tens of thousands of dollars, spend a few dollars and a few hours to read this book.”

BOB LEPINE, cohost of *FamilyLife Today*

“A commonsense approach to ten common mistakes concerning time management, sex, grades, relationships with parents, and other things that might seem simple but rarely are.”

DR. MARVIN OLASKY, editor in chief of *World* magazine

“Alex’s goal is to spare college-bound young people from entering college thoughtlessly and then drifting after they are there. The book has all the right ingredients to meet that goal.”

DR. LELAND RYKEN, professor at Wheaton College

“All the things I speak to college students about are here: maintaining your faith, developing nurturing friendships, having wisdom in relationships, becoming mature, finding balance, growing in spiritual maturity, seizing opportunities. A must-read for kids headed to college and those already there.”

TEDD TRIPP, best-selling author of *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*

“When Alex talks about thriving at college, he speaks from experience. He has spent a lot of time on campus: from undergrad to professor. Put all of that together, along with a wide knowledge of Scripture, and you have the ideal author of a really helpful book.”

DR. MICHAEL HORTON, professor at Westminster Seminary California

“I’ve been a campus pastor for the last seventeen years and have seen a lot of excellent books on how a Christian student should go about being a truly Christian student. Chediak’s book is the best I’ve seen.”

BEN PATTERSON, campus pastor at Westmont College

“A handbook of practical wisdom for the would-be college student. Essential summer reading for every incoming freshman.”

DR. GENE VEITH, provost of Patrick Henry College

“Alex cuts through the nonsense and non-advice so many college students receive to tell them exactly what you need to know: college is a pivotal season that carries great promise, but you have to take specific steps *now* to set yourself apart and thrive. *Thriving at College* is a cheat sheet, a strategy session, and a pep talk rolled into one. Investing in this book is investing in your future.”

LISA ANDERSON, host of Focus on the Family’s *The Boundless Show*

For more endorsements, see www.alexchediak.com.

To my students:

May your hearts be steadfast, trusting in the Lord. May you be zealous for good deeds. May you live godly, pure, fruitful, and productive lives that make Jesus look beautiful to others.

Contents

Foreword by Alex and Brett Harris ix

Preface xi

Introduction: Surviving or Thriving?

Making College the Best Years of Your Life (So Far) xix

PART 1: COLLEGE MATTERS

Common Mistake #1: Chucking Your Faith 3

Common Mistake #2: Treating College as if It Were High School 31

PART 2: RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Common Mistake #3: Not Being Intentional 61

Common Mistake #4: Distorting Dating and Romance 87

Common Mistake #5: Refusing to Grow Up 113

PART 3: CHARACTER MATTERS

Common Mistake #6: Being a Flake 147

Common Mistake #7: Living out of Balance 171

PART 4: ACADEMICS MATTER

Common Mistake #8: Being Too Passive or Too Cocky 197

Common Mistake #9: Living for Grades 223

Common Mistake #10: Wasting Opportunities 257

**Conclusion: Don't Waste Your College Years: Get Ready
for the Real World** 283

Appendix 1: The College Selection Process 295

Appendix 2: Do You Own Your Christian Faith? 307

Acknowledgments 319

Notes 323

Foreword

COLLEGE CAN BE a wonderful and a dangerous place. We've seen some of our peers flourish and find their identity at school, and we've seen others completely lose their way—or even self-destruct. Is the college experience inherently bipolar, good for some and unavoidably bad for others? Or is there another possibility: that each outcome is a path we can choose to take? In this terrific book, former college student and current college professor Alex Chediak says the answer to that last question is “Yes!”—and we wholeheartedly agree.

For most high school graduates today, going to college is the default. As a result, a lot of teens end up drifting from high school into college without any clear plan in mind. Maybe you are going to make your parents happy or to get away from somewhere or someone, or maybe college just sounds like a fun, new experience. Whatever your motivation, entering college without a sense of purpose is dangerous.

Why? Because for most young adults, college provides at once more freedom and more responsibility than you've ever

had before. Whether you choose to focus on the freedom or the responsibilities of college will determine whether you thrive—or just survive. At college there are no parents to make you read your Bible, do your homework, get sleep, eat well, or do laundry. At college—even at Christian universities—there are “friends” who are willing to support whatever lifestyle you choose to engage in: from bookworm to party animal.

So college is both a crisis and an opportunity. A crisis, because while embracing the *freedom* of campus life can lead to temporary fun, the end result can be a lifetime of regret. An opportunity, because embracing the *responsibility* of college can result in incredible intellectual, spiritual, social, emotional, and physical growth.

The student who thrives at college—the student who glorifies God with his or her college years—is the one who sees it as a great opportunity that requires great responsibility. Alex Chediak understands this better than most, with the experience and heart to help students reach their full God-given potential. *Thriving at College* will help you navigate the common pitfalls relating to faith, relationships, academics, and extracurricular activities.

There is no better guide to college than this.

—*Alex and Brett Harris, Patrick Henry College,
cofounders of TheRebellion.com and coauthors
of Do Hard Things and Start Here*

Preface

I MADE THE decision to go to college almost by accident. What else was I supposed to do after high school? I was a fairly good student, but I lacked the maturity to make that really huge decision in a constructive, sensible manner. Frankly, my college years could have been better. Today, I look back on my younger self in college and wish I could have a cup of coffee with him. I wish I could give him some hard-earned advice.

That's why I'm writing this book. I can't take my younger self out to coffee. There's no time machine for that. But as a college professor today, I have the chance to observe students and how they live their lives. I'm amazed at how many of them remind me of my former self. This book is, in essence, an attempt at taking you out to Starbucks and telling you what I've learned about the college years—and, most important, telling you how to make your college season the best years of your life (so far). I cannot tell you how much I wish someone had told me these things when I was in college.

Our culture has a definite perspective on what college

should involve. If you follow it, you'll throw your best years away, chasing experience after experience, mastering video games, hanging out at the mall, watching movies, and generally delaying responsibility. They'll tell you that college is about having fun, living it up. And they'll say that avoiding true adulthood doesn't need to end at graduation. Last year four out of five graduates moved back in with Mom and Dad. Seven in ten did not have a job lined up when they walked the stage on their big day, having just spent \$100,000 and 20 percent of their lives. True, some of these factors were influenced by a weak economy. But the fact remains that our culture promotes the idea of prolonged adolescence.

Did you recently graduate from high school? Not sure what you'll do next? You are not alone. I've been there. It's one of the biggest decisions you'll ever make. But high-school graduation is also a milestone toward something else. It's a step toward functional independence from Mom and Dad—a big step. If your parents love you, they established rules in your household. But at almost any college you can name, I guarantee you that nobody will tell you when to go to sleep, when to wake up, when to do your homework, when to turn off your PlayStation, and when to say no to another late-night donut or movie.

What do you want to be when you graduate? I'm not asking what you want to *do*, but what you want to *be*. A typical twenty-two-year-old in our day is unstable, uncertain, and unrealistic. I was, too, and not that long ago. College students tend to have a million ideas for what they want to

do and no idea how to get there or if they're even good at it. Our society tends to make people feel so "affirmed" all their lives that they lose the proper, objective basis for affirmation: a gift, a talent, a skill, as demonstrated by some accomplishment. Instead, everyone gets a trophy in Little League for showing up. When people are regularly reminded how special and talented they are, they're shocked when they're shuffled off the stage of their latest obsession, like another failed *American Idol* contestant.

It doesn't have to be that way. You don't have to fritter away your college experience, going from parties to cramming sessions week in and week out without any overarching purpose. You don't have to experience "failure to launch." You can be a productive, fruitful, godly adult at an early age. You can avoid "think[ing] of [yourself] more highly than [you] ought" and instead think of yourself "with sober [realistic] judgment" (Romans 12:3). And if you are a Christian, a life of fruitful obedience—a life devoted to good works—is the only appropriate response to what God has done for you (Titus 3:8). Let's look at a pair of examples.

In 1924, a young boy named John moved with his family to Martinsville, Indiana, just when he was starting high school. John was strongly influenced by his father, who raised him to work hard at school and on the farm and gave him mottoes like these: *Don't whine, don't complain, and don't make excuses*. When the chores and homework were done (and only then), John found time for basketball—and for leading his team to the state championship finals for three consecutive years.

But John's father wasn't very interested in basketball. He was far more interested in his son's character. He wanted his son to never stop striving to develop his full, God-given potential and to give maximum effort in the classroom, on the farm, and on the court. By example he taught long-suffering and faithfulness. At one point Dad lost the family's farm because of some freak illness that spread among the animals, killing them. Dad never complained or whined, not even to the banker who took the property. How different from the entitlement mentality of our day.

John worked his way through college at Purdue University. While he studied English, a field in which he later taught, he also played basketball and helped his team win a national championship in 1932. Later that year, with the events of the Great Depression, John lost his life's savings less than a week before he was supposed to marry Nell, his high-school sweetheart. Like his dad, John never whined, complained, or made excuses. A friend of the family heard about his loss and gave him a small loan. The day after his wedding, John left town for a weeklong job. He had to start paying the bills and paying back that loan.

John's age in 1932? Twenty-two years old. John was more mature, hardworking, and responsible at twenty-two than most young men today are at thirty-two.

Why? John thought that doing his very best at everything was *just the normal thing to do*. He later coached at the college level and taught his players nuggets of gold:

- “Don’t try to be better than someone else. But never stop trying to be the best you can be.”
- “When you blame others, you are trying to excuse yourself.”
- “No one is an overachiever. How can you rise above your level of competency? No, we’re all underachievers to different degrees. . . . Don’t measure yourself by what you’ve accomplished, but rather by what you should have accomplished with your abilities.”
- “Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.”

Not surprisingly, this man went on to become the most successful, most accomplished basketball coach in the history of the sport, winning ten national championships in his last twelve years at UCLA. His name was John Robert Wooden, and he died in the summer of 2010, just a couple of months shy of his one-hundredth birthday.

But basketball wasn’t John’s life, and winning wasn’t everything to him. John told others, “There is only one kind of life that truly wins, and that is the one that places faith in the hands of the Savior.”¹ He was a deeply humble man, often avoiding the spotlight and living far below his income potential, even until his last days. John had character and principle and even as a young man was wise beyond his years. He forfeited championship opportunities in the 1940s because African American players weren’t allowed to compete for the national title (and his team was racially integrated, even in that day). You see, by every indication John was a Christian

above all else. Christianity gave him the grounding, and the perspective, to live a life of incredible fruitfulness and productivity and to embrace adulthood without going through a lengthy period of irresponsible living.

John isn't just some throwback. No, there are John Woodens in our own day. Meet Nick Vujicic, a young man born inexplicably without arms or legs, just one foot to help him motor around. Think you've got it bad? You can only imagine how he got mercilessly teased and bullied in school. Nick began to struggle with suicidal thoughts at the age of eight. Yet he ultimately found hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ, in knowing that Christ provides amazing freedom from both sin and despair and gives amazing hope both in heaven and on earth. Nick took comfort from passages like John 9, which speaks of a man being born blind so that God's glory might be displayed in his life.

Nick learned to see that God had a plan for him, and that through faith in Christ he could triumph in the midst of any adversity. At age seventeen, Nick began sharing his testimony at Bible studies. He received one invitation, then another, and then another, as many lives were deeply impacted by his story. At the age of twenty-three he founded a charitable organization called Life Without Limbs, having already earned a double bachelor's degree in accounting and financial planning from Griffith University in Logan, Australia.

Today, Nick is twenty-eight years old, and he travels all over the world seeking to motivate others and share Christ. He's also been able to live on his own, a long-time dream of

his. He's developed creative, ingenious ways for turning on the lights, combing his hair, and brushing his teeth. He even puts his college degrees to work, investing in real estate and other industries.

How about you? What's your dream? How do you hope to make a difference? Most of you know, instinctively, that a life of goofing around and hanging out is unfulfilling. I hope you also know that self-centered, workaholic professionalism can't satisfy you, either. Chasing money and prestige is a fool's errand. Its pleasure is fleeting, leaving you with an empty, gnawing hunger for more.

No, you want to be a part of something great. College is about finding your place in God's world—not fitting God into your plans, but finding your place in his—so that you can be a blessing to others. That's what this book is about: *thriving at college*. It's about how to get there, how to avoid getting distracted along the way, how to launch in an awesome way, how to live with maximal impact, and how to change the world in whatever little corner you find yourself. This book is about making your college years the best you've ever had and a launching pad for all that goes with responsible Christian adulthood.

Perhaps you already have a few years of college under your belt. Your college experience has been good, but you want it to be great. You want to make the most out of the semesters left before graduation. You want to launch out of college in a way that really honors God and everyone who's

helped you get there. If that's you, stay tuned. I pray this book will spark a new beginning.

I'll talk about what makes college different from high school, about the importance of developing your mind and your character, and about the importance of your relationships with different types of people, including your peers, your professors, your pastors, and your mentors. I'll talk about the value of forming the right kinds of friendships, both with the same sex and the opposite sex. And I'll talk about relating to your parents in this in-between stage when you're out on your own but still under their dime.

It is my prayer for you, the Christian student, that you won't just survive college but thrive in college. That you will not just keep the faith, but dig deeper than you thought was ever possible. That you will not just choose an academic pursuit, but discover your calling. That you will not just have fun with friends, but cultivate lifelong relationships of substance with those who most provoke you to trust and love God, to put away childishness, to make wise choices, and as missionary William Carey once said, to "expect great things from God and attempt great things for God."²

Mostly I pray that you will not just memorize facts and figures, but increasingly love God with all your heart and mind, seeing the connections between assorted truths in the academic world and the God of truth, and seeing the entire world as the theater of God's glory.

You ready? Let's get after it.

Introduction

*Surviving or Thriving? Making College
the Best Years of Your Life (So Far)*

MIKE AND CHRIS were freshmen at a Christian college. They were assigned as roommates by a more or less random process and had not previously known each other. Mike was going to that school because his parents made it clear that it was the only school for which they'd pay tuition. He figured going to college was better than getting a job after high school or sitting around the house. Besides, being away from home would give him more freedom, fewer household chores, and a greater variety of new diversions (not to mention the girls in the dorm across campus who had already caught his eye). However, Mike found his roommate, Chris, to be a bit different.

Chris really enjoyed his orientation day, everything from the community feel of the campus to the interesting, personable faculty. He particularly enjoyed conversing with the professors in the humanities department, the area he was planning to pursue. In fact, the professors he met had done

some really interesting work outside the classroom, and one of them was the coach of the debate team, for which Chris was planning to try out. He had met a few members of the team during his campus orientation day and had enjoyed hanging out with them. Chris had also been an Eagle Scout and had led wilderness trips the past summer. Through Facebook, he had connected with some of the guys in the school's wilderness club and was looking forward to getting to know them better.

On the other hand, Mike's extracurricular activities in high school were bagging groceries at a nearby food store and playing sports and video games with his friends.

As Mike and Chris started to get to know each other during move-in day, they began to realize that their perspectives on college were quite different. Mike had already figured out who in the dorm had brought the most up-to-date Xbox system and where a few under-the-radar first-weekend parties were being held. And those girls I mentioned? Ever resourceful, Mike had already found many of them on Facebook.

Meanwhile, Chris was setting up his desk and books so that his living situation would be most conducive to keeping track of his classes. Books? That's right. Chris had *already* purchased his textbooks and, after setting up his laptop and printer, had printed out an Excel version of his academic schedule for the fall semester. He had even (get this) built in planned study times between classes and jotted down the library's hours. (In case you're worried, Chris also set up

two-hour blocks for dinner breaks and extended time on the weekends to connect with new friends.) While chatting with Mike, he tacked a copy of his schedule above his desk, next to his bed.

Mike couldn't believe his bad luck. He thought about how annoying it was going to be to educate Mr. Organized on the finer points of college life.

COMPETING VISIONS

We all have a worldview—a “mental map” of reality, a set of assumptions or beliefs.* Your parents have one. Your friends have one. I have one. And you have one. Your mental map informs your expectations about high school, college, friends, guys, girls, church, sports, weekends, and everything else. It informs you of what to expect not just of others but of yourself.

What, then, informs this all-informing mental map? Whatever you let shape your mind and heart—your parents, your values, your pastors, friends, what you listen to on your iPod, who you follow on Twitter, your movies, shows, magazines, and all the rest.

What, then, informs this all-informing mental map? Whatever you let shape your mind and heart.

What does your mental map say you are as a young adult? Are you “just” a teenager or early twenties adolescent

* Our worldview is also shaped by our religious perspective—that is, our beliefs about God, the spiritual world, and the basis (if any) for morality, sin, judgment, grace, what happens after death, etc. The key differences between the Christian and the atheistic worldviews will be explored a bit in the next chapter.

who, because you're still trying to figure out who you are, isn't capable of doing much? Rather than setting high goals and working toward them, do you need to simply experience whatever your heart fancies at the moment in order to ensure you aren't suppressing healthy self-expression or somehow missing out? Or are you a young adult, capable of delaying gratification and working steadily for meaningful, significant goals, with talent, strength, and vigor on loan from God? Do you see yourself in a season of diligent preparation for becoming the kind of man or woman who can embrace greater responsibilities down the road (job, marriage, family, ministry), even as you do good and bring God glory now?

Broadly speaking, those are the two visions competing for your heart as a young man or woman in the twenty-first century. According to one perspective, school is about just getting by, keeping your parents happy so you can enjoy *your* time between the drudgery of classes. According to the other perspective, college is about glorifying God with every aspect of your week, loving him with all your mind, and training hard for the good works that he has prepared for you (Ephesians 2:10), while developing relationships that will reinforce your convictions and propel you in a God-ward direction. And while there might be some intentional downtime, there's no "*your* time." You are someone who takes care of the time, gifts, and talents that God has entrusted to you.

YOUTH CULTURE

These days the entertainment and leisure industry is aggressively marketing its vision of youth culture to you. That's right, lots of people have a vested interest in making you believe that being young is all about having fun, partying, and more or less ignoring life's responsibilities for as long as possible. It's a culture of low expectations and endless amusement.

In a former era, people moved directly from childhood to adulthood without a long season of adultlike freedoms and opportunities without the associated responsibilities and commitments. Young adults Alex and Brett Harris, authors of *Do Hard Things*, tell on their blog of David Farragut, the U.S. Navy's first admiral, who became a midshipman on the warship *Essex* at the age of ten. By the age of twelve he was given command of his first ship. George Washington, the first president of the United States, mastered geometry, trigonometry, and surveying at about the age of twelve, though folks in his day did not consider him particularly bright. At the age of sixteen he was named official surveyor for Culpepper County, Virginia, and would earn the equivalent of \$100,000 in today's dollars per year for his three-year term. After citing these examples, the Harris brothers write:

These examples astound us in our day and age, but this is because we view life through an extra social category called "adolescence," a category that would

have been completely foreign to men and women just 100 years ago. Prior to the late 1800s there were only 3 categories of age: childhood, adulthood, and old age. It was only with the coming of the early labor movement with its progressive child labor laws, coupled with new compulsory schooling laws, that a new category, called adolescence, was invented. Coined by G. Stanley Hall, who is often considered the father of American psychology, “adolescence” identified the artificial zone between childhood and adulthood when young people ceased to be children, but were no longer permitted by law to assume the normal responsibilities of adulthood, such as entering into a trade or finding gainful employment. Consequently, marriage and family had to be delayed as well, and so we invented “the teenager,” an unfortunate creature who had all the yearnings and capabilities of an adult, but none of the freedoms or responsibilities.

Teenage life became a 4-year sentence of continuing primary education and relative idleness known as “high school” (four years of schooling which would later be repeated in the first two years of college). Abolished by law were the young Farraguts and young Washingtons, who couldn’t spare the time to be children any longer than necessary. Cultivated instead was the culture we know today, where young people are allowed, encouraged, and even forced to remain quasi-children for much longer than necessary.¹

Is that what high school was for you? Getting A's and B's, but never having to work too hard? If so, maybe that wasn't such a good deal after all. Maybe you were robbed of the requirement—the *opportunity*—to more fully develop your academic abilities. Are you thinking college will be just as easy? If you are, boy, are you in for a surprise, especially if you are in one of my classes! If that's you, stay tuned, because unless your attitude changes, college academics just might blow you away.

You see, God has a completely different idea for your college years, which he reveals in several places in the Bible:

- “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” (1 Timothy 4:12)
- “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.” (Ecclesiastes 9:10)
- “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” (Colossians 3:23)
- “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31)
- “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your *mind*.” (Luke 10:27, emphasis added)

And when our past sins seek to lure us back or haunt us with guilt, God's Word answers with “therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside

every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2; see also Philippians 3:13-14).

We also see it exemplified in men like Daniel, who went to “college” in Babylon and “resolved that he would

not defile himself” (by disobeying God’s commands) and at the end of three years was found to be “ten times better” than his classmates in “every matter of wisdom and understanding” (Daniel 1:8, 18-20).

We see it in Joseph—a young guy who certainly had his fair share of hard times, and then some—yet never grew bitter, never gave up, and never betrayed God. Because he was diligent, his responsibilities in Potiphar’s house grew (Genesis 39:2-4). When tempted by sexual

immorality, Joseph reasoned, “How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?” Instead of moving closer, Joseph consciously moved away from the danger (Genesis 39:9-10). And after that obedience was rewarded with prison time, Joseph went from being a model employee to a model prisoner (Genesis 39:21-23). But even as a prisoner, his responsibility and authority were increased, as his superiors

When our past sins seek to lure us back or haunt us with guilt, God’s Word answers with “therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

couldn't help but recognize his extraordinary capability and faithfulness. Is *that* your vision of young-adult life?

How will things go for Mike and Chris? The proof will come over time. But for now, know this: When Mike and Chris were packing for college, the most significant thing they brought with them didn't need to fit in their luggage. It didn't have to fit because it was invisible. Invisible, yet all-controlling. Mike and Chris brought contrasting worldviews with them—and those worldviews were influencing their attitudes and behavior as they arrived on campus.

There's actually a second invisible friend that Mike and Chris both brought to college with them: their *character*. By "character" I don't just mean "personality." God-given personality differences, as we'll see, are *amoral*—they are not intrinsically good or bad. Character, on the other hand, has moral degrees to it. Character is measured by qualities like honesty or dishonesty, industriousness or laziness, responsibility or irresponsibility, kindness or selfishness, hastiness or self-control, etc.

Put simply, the kinds of people Mike and Chris had become through their decisions and responses to life's circumstances (along with their worldviews) will shape their ongoing attitudes and behaviors. Their character differences help explain why Mike has gone on Facebook to look for the girls but doesn't yet know where his classes are, let alone what books he needs. And they explain why Chris printed out his schedule, even though classes don't start until next week. Here's the principle:

Worldview & Character → Attitude & Behavior

In other words, our worldview (how we think) and our character (who we are) impact our attitude (what we think) and our behavior (what we do). We've looked at worldview (how we think). Let's turn our attention to character (who we are). For studying the subject of character, we can't do better than the book of Proverbs. There we meet three interesting characters: the fool, the sluggard, and the wise. Now chances are, there's a little of all three in each of us. But if we're ever going to be characterized as wise, we'll need to set our sights on understanding wisdom.

THE FOOL, THE SLUGGARD, AND THE WISE

The first attribute of the fool in Proverbs is *simplicity*. Not simplicity in the sense of don't-worry-be-happy and living off the land. No, the word refers to *gullibility*, moral irresponsibility, and lacking *sense* (the knowledge to live well): "O simple ones, learn prudence; O fools, learn sense" (Proverbs 8:5). The "simple" lack sense. Whatever they may know, they haven't translated that knowledge into an ability to make choices that exhibit good judgment.

They are also gullible: "The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps" (Proverbs 14:15). Once again, simplicity is contrasted with prudence. But the simple are also willful and irresponsible: "The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it" (Proverbs 22:3; 27:12). They're morally suspect.

The third attribute of the fool is *dullness* or *obstinacy*. He already thinks he's going the right way, so he has no need to receive advice (Proverbs 12:15), as he's far too busy dispensing it (Proverbs 10:8; 12:23). He disregards wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:7) and does not learn even when he's corrected (Proverbs 17:10). Instead, he returns to folly (Proverbs 26:11), though it leads to his own destruction (Proverbs 1:32).

Okay, on to the sluggard. You'll meet plenty of these in college, so be alert. The word *sluggard* is interesting: It appears only fourteen times in the English Standard Version of the Bible, all in the book of Proverbs. Sluggards are lazy: They don't attend to their responsibilities and so are ultimately overwhelmed by them (Proverbs 6:9-10). It isn't that sluggards lack aspirations—they definitely have desires, but they lack the discipline to work at making them a reality. They rationalize their laziness (Proverbs 20:4) and have a generally high and unsubstantiated view of themselves (Proverbs 26:16). It is difficult for them to learn and grow since they think they're already awesome. Because they lack diligence, they are a nightmare as employees: "Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to those who send him" (Proverbs 10:26). These people simply do not get stuff done, and they're full of bizarre excuses (Proverbs 26:13).

As students, sluggards don't work hard but expect to do well. Before tests they feel confident, even though they haven't spent much time studying. Why bother when they already know the stuff? Other hardworking students spend

hours studying for tests, agonizing over the few concepts they have not yet fully mastered, not content with the 90 percent they already understand backward and forward. Oh, these students may be a bit more miserable; they are far less pleased with themselves. They're too busy striving to get better. But after the test, it's the other way around. The ones who lacked confidence now have the wind at their backs. And the ones who *were* confident are now in despair, wondering how they could have been so misguided. But for some the deception continues: They tell themselves that they *knew* the material; it was the *exam* (and the professor) that were unfair. Hint: Don't do that. Chances are your teacher's tests and assignments are a better indication of your true abilities than your own estimation.

Finally, the wise. These are the ones who *actively* and *vigorously* give themselves to instruction—not just in classes, but in life. Wisdom begins with the fear of God and a desire to be taught by him (Proverbs 1:7). Wisdom is for anyone who wants it (Proverbs 1:20, 23), but it is hard won (Proverbs 2:1-4). It requires the acceptance of correction, even rebuke (Proverbs 3:11-12). It gives rise to a heart knowledge, not just a head knowledge, which means that the wise know in the core of their being the difference between right and wrong. And they have the discretion and discernment to choose the good path (Proverbs 2:9-11, 20).

How do you recognize the wise? They are good listeners (James 1:19). They are slow to share their opinions, preferring to understand a situation first (Proverbs 18:13, 17). And

since they are humble, they are not motivated to speak by a desire to impress others, pontificating about things on which they are ignorant, or making commitments that they cannot possibly keep. The wise guard their tempers (Proverbs 16:32). They are disciplined; they can delay gratification, knowing that the best enjoyments come at their appointed times, and in their appropriate, limited doses. So while they *can* have fun, they are not *ruled* by the desire to have fun. And they care about others, knowing that loving others is the natural manifestation of love for God (Luke 10:27). Wisdom has more to do with the disposition of your life than with the facts and figures you know in your head.

Wisdom is for anyone who wants it.

During college, you'll want to grow in wisdom. This will require regularly praying for wisdom, acknowledging that it comes from God. And it comes from God in two ways: directly from the Bible, by reflecting on passages and the overarching themes of Scripture, and also from the hardships of everyday life. Listen to how Derek Kidner describes it in his commentary on Proverbs:

If we could analyze the influences that build up a godly character to maturity, we might well find that the agencies which we call natural vastly outweighed those that we call supernatural. The book of Proverbs reassures us that this, if it is true, is no reflection on the efficacy of God's grace; for the hard facts of life,

which knock some of the nonsense out of us, are God's facts and his appointed school of character; they are not alternatives to his grace, but means of it; for everything is of grace, from the power to know to the power to obey.²

In addition, growing in wisdom requires walking with the wise (Proverbs 13:20). We'll talk about the importance of good companions in chapter 3. In short, whether you are growing in wisdom or not will have a big influence on whether you *thrive* in college or merely *survive*.

SURVIVING VS. THRIVING

Whether you survive or thrive has everything to do with the worldview and character that you bring into college. These will shape your attitude and behavior (as we saw with Mike and Chris), which will soon give rise to *habits*. We reap what we sow (Galatians 6:7). Over time, our habits shape our destiny.

*Worldview & Character → Attitudes & Behaviors → Habits
& Destiny*

Within the first month of college, Mike and Chris will be forming habits—some for good, some for bad. Bad habits come naturally. Good habits, like finishing your homework before socializing, will probably need to be intentionally developed—unless you are on the neurotic end of the scale, which we'll get to in due course. For most of us, they don't come naturally. So you'll need to identify a few crucial habits

and then actively establish them into your routine so that they *become* your default response.

But you may be wondering, *Hey, what's wrong with having fun at college? If all Chris does is study, he's going to really miss out.* We'll get into this a lot more in future chapters. For now, consider the wisdom of my sixth-grade teacher. Whenever we were being rambunctious (and yes, I was generally guilty), she'd say, "Alex, there's a time and place for everything." It sounded trite at the time.

I did not yet know that the writer of Ecclesiastes actually gives us a similar perspective (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). Briefly, there's nothing wrong with a healthy dose of recreation and relationship building. God intends these to bring helpful refreshment to us in our daily labors.

But Mike's problem is that he seems to be building his life around amusement, which sooner or later will result in life's responsibilities raining on his parade (Proverbs 24:33-34). Chris is setting himself up to be productive, which will allow him to later enjoy recreation and friendships—and even to derive greater strength from them.

Though worldview and character are large topics (entire books have been written on each of them), let's spend some time on a specific area relevant to success in college: the *assumption* of responsibility. This attribute is crucial in the college years in large part because, for most of you, it is the first time you have stepped out from under the umbrella of your parents' watchful protection and care. Unless you are in a strict military boarding school, nobody is going to tell you when to go to bed.

Or when to turn off the PlayStation. Or when to quit chatting on Facebook. So you are living in a glorious, crucially significant in-between stage: What kind of kid/teen you have been has brought you to where you are, but what you will become as an adult remains to be seen.

Whether you thrive or merely survive at college will depend to a large degree on the extent to which you *assume responsibility*.

ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY

Let's start with the first word: *assume*. To “assume” anything is to consider it a given—right from the start.

In my freshman year, I had a first-semester lab course that was an introduction to the field of ceramic engineering, and we made all kinds of ceramic bowls, plates, and cups, as well as studied the science behind these products. I chose the one graduate student who I knew was a Christian to be my teaching assistant (TA), figuring that she might have more slack in her grading standards. (TAs actually do a lot of the grading at college, especially for lab courses.) After all, Christians are supposed to be loving and merciful, right?

I remember writing my first of many lab reports. I sent her a draft to ask her if it was okay (hint: never do this unless the professor or TA invites you to). I figured she had extra time to read it, and besides, it was her job to care. In addition, I was uncertain about a number of the things I said in the report, but rather than go to my textbook or the library to try to find the answers, I figured I'd just ask her (since she

was all-knowing). I also didn't bother to spell-check what I sent her. I figured even if I misspelled a few words, she'd get the drift.

Her reply was terse: "Do your own research. And spell-check your own work, or it will negatively impact your grade." That was it! She gave me nothing in the way of help that I was hoping for. There went my semester of Christian mercy.[†]

Factoid

Did you know that a typical class average GPA in college, especially for larger courses commonly taken by freshmen and sophomores, is about a 2.65/4.00 (about a B-)? And it's not uncommon for about 30 to 40 percent of such a class to earn a C+ or lower.³ Yet, when surveyed at the beginning of the semester, about 90 percent of students think they'll get a B or an A. Think some folks might be disappointed?

Yet what she *did* give me was priceless: the assumption of responsibility. I learned from her that it was *my job* to make sure the content of my report was factual. It was *my job* to check for spelling and grammatical mistakes. It was *not* her job to grade my work multiple times (so that I could blame her if I got a bad grade). It took a while, but I learned

[†] I later read in my Bible that my attitude was not uncommon. In his letter to Timothy, Paul spoke about slaves serving Christian masters. Slaves in that day were in many ways like employees or servants in our day. He said, "Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved" (1 Timothy 6:2). In other words, don't slack off just because the boss is a Christ follower.

to be resourceful, going after answers in the textbook and the library and respecting the time of my superiors when I did need to ask questions. By the way, a great way to do this is to approach professors, during their scheduled office hours (which you underlined on the syllabus), in this way: “Dr. Smith, I did the assigned reading, underlined key concepts, and took notes. May I please ask you a few clarifying questions?”

The assumption of responsibility starts with the recognition that, whatever the assignment, it is *mine, not someone else's*. I own it. It is not someone else's job to do it for me. This means, for example, reading the syllabus or a particular assignment before asking questions that may already have been answered. If you have a course schedule, then you already know where the professor is going in the course, so you can prepare for class. You may even know what each exam will cover.

But the assumption of responsibility is not just being resourceful. It is the fundamental recognition of the fact that you own your decisions. Other people aren't responsible to do what only you can and must do. If you have a homework assignment, get it done. If you need to write a paper, go to the library and get the necessary background information. You have the God-given faculty of initiative and the responsibility to make things happen. God will hold you accountable. Like I said earlier, you *will* reap what you sow—there is no getting around that principle (Galatians 6:7).

If you assume responsibility, you have the right frame of

mind for developing your talents and reaching your potential. This is true whether you go to college or choose another path after high school. But to thrive at college requires more, not less, than the assumption of responsibility. It requires knowing the purpose of college.

THE PURPOSE OF COLLEGE

In addition to providing a rigorous, well-rounded education, college should be a launching pad into all that goes with responsible Christian adulthood. Most of you will enter college under your parents' care and financial support. But you'll graduate a man or woman ready to assume your adult role in an interdependent society and a particular local church.

Factoid

Did you know that according to Monster's 2009 "Annual Entry-Level Job Outlook," about 40 percent of 2008 grads still live with their parents? And 42 percent of the 2006 graduates surveyed said they're still living at home.⁴

At least you *ought* to. It's shameful that one in every three men of ages twenty-two to thirty-four is still living at home with Mom and Dad.⁵ Don't join that statistic. Avoid that destiny by growing up—now. We'll talk more about this in future chapters. And, hey, if you are living with your folks, pay rent like you would to any other landlord. That'll get you going in the right direction.

Though you may feel on top of things, most of you have not yet proven yourself in the world. If you've always gone to school a quick drive from home, college is probably the longest you've ever been away from home at one stretch. You'll be tested and tried. How you respond will determine the sort of man or woman you'll become. In this book, I'll break down the challenges and opportunities of college into foundational matters (chapters 1–2), significant relationships (friends and mentors, guy-girl, and Mom and Dad, chapters 3–5), issues of character (chapters 6–7), and academics (chapters 8–10).

Are you ready to launch into all that goes along with responsible Christian adulthood? Do you want to make college the best years of your life (so far)? Are you ready to cultivate relationships of eternal significance? Are you eager to grow in wisdom, leaving behind the ways of the fool and the sluggard? Are you ready to develop your academic gifts, honing the talents God gave you into strong, useful skills?

Then let's get started.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. Why did you choose to go to college? What were your motivations? Your goals?
2. Describe your worldview. What do you think has been most formative for your worldview?
3. What would your close friends say are the strengths and weaknesses of your character?

4. What are some practical things you need to do to become wiser?
5. List two ways in which you are currently assuming responsibility. Is there an area you need to claim?

PART 1

COLLEGE MATTERS

COMMON MISTAKE #1: Chuckling Your Faith

> *Thrive Principle: Grow Closer to God*

THE DAY BEFORE you entered college, you were a kid in your parents' home. But you'll hopefully exit college as an *adult*, fully owning your life, your choices, and the consequences of those choices. If you started college as a Christian, you probably did so because your parents raised you in a Christian home. Thank God for that blessing; chances are it has helped you more than you know.

But college is a season in which you can—and must—really take ownership of your faith. You can't truly grow in the Christian life on borrowed faith, and most find college to be a season in which their Christian faith is put to the test. Even at a Christian college, you'll probably experience some

influences that could draw you away from God. At non-Christian colleges and universities, the pull away from Jesus Christ often comes from every angle and can be quite fierce.

So Mistake #1 is abandoning the Christian faith. In fact, even to *neglect* your Christian faith is to commit Mistake #1

A Christianity not practiced today becomes a Christianity that is absent tomorrow.

because a Christianity not practiced today becomes a Christianity that is absent tomorrow. To thrive in college you'll need to spread your wings *from* the firm foundation of your Christian faith. Let's

unpack what you don't want to do (abandon or neglect your faith) and what you do want to do (grow closer to God).

INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGES TO CHRISTIANITY

There are basically two lines of attack that your Christian faith may encounter in college: intellectual attacks and moral attacks. Let's take a look at them one at a time.

Particularly if you are at a non-Christian campus, here's the sort of thing you can expect to hear:

- “The Bible is mythology.”
- “Christianity, in claiming to be the only way, is intolerant.”
- “Morality is relative, not absolute.”
- “Truth is subjective. What's true for you does not have to be true for me.”
- “Jesus was a great moral teacher, nothing more.”

Q: *Do you recommend revealing one's faith in a classroom setting? I've found that thus far, I've kind of downplayed or checked myself when participating in discussions in my sociology class because I don't want to be scoffed at.* —KATE, FRESHMAN, Creative Writing

A: It is wise to be cautious. The extent to which a classroom allows for a fair-minded exchange of ideas depends largely on the professor. Professors set the rules for group dialogue and the extent to which any ideas or beliefs are disregarded or mocked. The best approach is to seek to understand the perspectives of others by asking simple, reasonable questions with a humble, gracious tone. Your questions can expose weaknesses, flaws, or inconsistencies in other people's arguments. You can learn a lot by asking questions like "How do you get to that conclusion?" or "How do you account for _____?" or even "What do you see as the biggest weaknesses to your perspective?" You can learn a lot this way—and open the door for private dialogue with others, even your professor, in which you can winsomely convey your Christian perspective.



- “We can be good people without God.”
- “Organized religion causes divisions and wars.”
- “There can’t be a good God because there is so much evil in this world.”
- “Evolution has proved that ‘God’ had nothing to do with the origin of the universe.”
- “To be a tolerant person, you can’t believe in moral absolutes.”*

Many of your professors will be overtly anti-Christian. That may seem hard to believe, but it’s true. In the United States, 4 percent of the overall population is either atheist or agnostic. That percentage, *among college professors*, varies from 24 to 37 percent. It increases the more elite the university.¹ My wife, Marni, attended Stanford University and was told within the first two weeks of her biology class, “Some of you may believe that God created the world. That’s nice. But your faith is personal, and it has no place in this classroom.” You see, the professor wanted to *privatize* Marni’s faith—as if Christianity were a nice, warm fairy tale that made her feel good, but of course could not possibly be true.

What should you do if this happens to you? First, recognize that you are not alone. Other Christians have been and *are* right there with you, and even at your school, you can find them if you look in the right places. You are not alone in another sense, either. The struggle with these questions

* A helpful, contemporary book for dealing with a lot of these common criticisms is *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008) by Tim Keller.

is not new. Whole libraries are devoted to books by intelligent, scholarly, godly Christians that respond effectively and in detail to each of the criticisms I listed. I'll mention a few in this chapter, and your pastor or parents may know of others.

Let's lay out some of the nuts and bolts of how Christians can not only stand firm, but be emboldened to live their Christian faith in every facet of their lives, including the classroom setting. With regard to intellectual challenges, we can more or less put them into two categories. The first has to do with the *evidence* or *believability* of Christianity. Can the Bible, written thousands of years ago by various men over many years, really have ongoing validity today? And could Jesus Christ really have risen from the dead? I mean, don't we now know that miracles are impossible?

THE BIBLE IS RELIABLE AND ACCURATE

If you test the Old and New Testaments the way a historian would test any old book, you'll find more supporting evidence for the sixty-six books of the Bible than for any other ancient book. No other book even comes close.[†] That means we can be very certain that the Bible we have today is the same Bible that early Christians had.

But does that mean our Bible is *accurate*? Well, no other

[†] There are over twelve thousand ancient copies of the Old Testament and more than fifteen thousand manuscripts of the New Testament available. These manuscripts overwhelmingly agree with one another, confirming that the Bible we have today has been passed down to us with no substantial changes. See, for example, F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 6th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981) or Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable & Relevant?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Also, Greg Koukl of Stand to Reason has several helpful shorter articles on this topic.

historical book, written by Christians or non-Christians, has ever successfully contradicted it on a matter of history. It has never been disproven. In fact, archaeological findings over the last fifty years have *strengthened*, not weakened, the case for the Bible's historical reliability.

But what about Jesus? Consider the alternative of accepting the Bible's message. Could a group of monotheistic Jewish men really have concocted the story of a man claiming to be God—and not just *a* god, but the *one* God who made the entire universe? And then this man is horrifically killed, after which he rises from the dead? And the guys making up this stuff are so certain of it that they are willing to get themselves killed for it? It takes more faith to think that such a wild story could be made up than to accept it at face value!

Jesus was the most amazing person who ever lived. Most regard him as a profoundly wise moral teacher. But what they neglect is that he also claimed, repeatedly, and to his own demise, that he was the Incarnation of the one God who made the entire universe. That sort of claim is either lunacy, the most sophisticated lie, or the utter truth.[‡] Again, which explanation takes more faith?

Now, of course, *if there is no God*, believing Jesus was deluded or a liar is easier than believing in the Resurrection. The disciples could have evaded the Roman guards, stolen Jesus' body, and then convinced the world that he rose from the dead. They could have been experiencing a series of mass

[‡] These three possibilities—Lord, liar, and lunatic—are discussed in C. S. Lewis's classic book *Mere Christianity*.

hallucinations (some form of wishful thinking) when they thought they saw him after his death. Or they could have made up the whole story, and Jesus of Nazareth never lived. Many bizarre things are more possible than a man rising from the dead, because a man rising from the dead is *impossible* if there is *no God*.

But that's just the point. The person seeking to discredit Christianity has generally *assumed* that the miraculous is impossible. Just as your non-Christian friends may be questioning your assumptions, feel free to examine theirs. We need to compare which perspective or assumptions make better sense of reality. What's more "open minded," to believe that miracles are possible or to believe they are impossible?

CHRISTIANITY MAKES GOOD SENSE

That brings me to the second category of intellectual objections to Christianity: *coherence*. In other words, is Christianity self-consistent? Does it explain and make sense of what we see in the world? Let me show you what I mean.

The Christian view

Christianity teaches that men and women were created in the image of God, as moral, intelligent agents, capable of abstract thinking and possessing consciousness. The fact that the universe exists means that something or someone must have always existed—the created order screams that God is

real (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:19-20).[§] As humans, we are all born into a fallen world and are, individually, fallen. What the Bible calls “sin” has infected every aspect of our lives. We often think bad thoughts and do bad things because, let’s face it, our very nature is corrupt. There is evil in the world, and there is evil *in us*. (The world, after all, is just a bunch of “us” multiplied billions of times.)

But God remains infinitely good and pure. And since we’re made in God’s image, we have an innate sense of right and wrong embedded into our conscience. Because God is good, he must be opposed to that which is evil—which includes us. Part of goodness is *justice*, and it is *just* to punish wickedness. The punishment is death, both physical and spiritual (eternal). That may seem harsh, but if we consider that God is infinitely worthy of our obedience, then our disregard of him is an infinite offense. So the punishment fits the crime. To reject God’s rightful rule in this life is to invite his rejection in the life to come.

But because God is also merciful, he has done something amazingly kind: He has chosen to become one of us and, as a man, succeed where we have failed. We (humanity) failed the test, disobeyed God, and became corrupt, while Jesus

[§] Theologians and philosophers call this a basic form of the cosmological argument for the existence of God. As R. C. Sproul puts it, “If anything exists now, then something must have the power of being within itself, that is, something must have necessary being” (*The Consequences of Ideas*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000, 73). Very few scientists would argue that the world is just an illusion or that it has always existed in its current form. Some atheists have taken the position that matter has always existed, but that essentially defies matter and simply pushes out the problem of existence: How does matter as matter have the power of being within itself? Is matter alive? Where do life and personality come from? The most rational conclusion is that everything both living and nonliving was originally created by something which itself is self-existent (namely, an intelligent being, God). See, for example, *Classical Apologetics* by R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsay (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

aced the test, obeyed God, and was exalted (Philippians 2:6-9). That obedience, for Jesus, included receiving God's punishment on behalf of every person who would ever trust in him, love him, and obey him. For every Christian, there is a "double exchange." Jesus takes all our corruption (our sin) upon himself, paying for it in full, and his perfect record of obeying God is transferred to our account. After that, God begins the work of remaking us in his image, the image that was corrupted by our rebellion against him. In fact, he puts us into a community (the church), which corporately is meant to be a reflection of the glory of God's grace in redeeming (or buying back) people who had rebelled against him.

All evil in the world will eventually be punished by the just, merciful, and omnipotent God.

The atheist view

The atheist view claims there is no God who created the world. The world is an accident that came together as a result of time and chance.[¶] Human beings are just complex collections of molecules. Our brains are not the product of any sort of intelligent design—there was no Designer. Consequently, life cannot possibly have any transcendent meaning whatsoever—there is no Person who stands outside of history and gives purpose to the events of our lives or lends validation to our instincts about right and wrong. That said, each

[¶] Have you ever asked yourself, What is "chance"? Chance is a nonentity. It has no ontological being. Chance is merely a way we describe probabilities. It cannot accomplish something, like the creation of the world. If I flip a coin, I have a 50 percent chance of getting tails, but chance doesn't cause the coin to flip. I do.

of us can create “meaning” for ourselves through living in a way that gives us satisfaction, by choosing our own values and pursuing them. We can and should pursue what is in the universal interest of mankind, since we ourselves make up mankind. And precisely *because* there is no God to enforce or eternally reward the right behavior, or punish the wrong behavior, doing what’s right is all the more virtuous than if we were to do good merely to be rewarded by some deity.**

The “spiritual but not religious” view

This view is an eclectic tossed salad in which people pick and choose what they want to believe from various religions—Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, New Age, you name it. Or they make up their own principles from popular self-help or psychology books. There isn’t one clear set of beliefs for these people, but there are a couple of common threads. They tend to believe that truth is relative, not absolute, and that all the religions of the world have something valuable to offer because they all teach us to be basically “good” people, whatever that means. They think God won’t particularly care about their religious beliefs when they die. The true higher power is much bigger than the tribal “gods” of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and all the other “-isms” we foolishly divide over and fight about. Even internally, organized religions cause conflict because they inevitably degrade into battles over power, ego, and money.

** Atheist writer Christopher Hitchens, for example, has advanced this argument.

This is the religion of *Star Wars*, *Avatar*, and John Lennon's "Imagine," a song played for mandatory meditation in a psychology class I once took. Being sincere and trying to do good is what counts. Peace out.

LET'S COMPARE

Okay, so which of these three views makes the most sense of reality? Notice that the Christian view is the only one that gives any meaning to morality—or to humans themselves. In the atheist scheme, you and I are just accidental blobs of molecules. Telling us it is wrong to kill each other is meaningless. The funny thing is that many atheists today (like Christopher Hitchens) are intensely interested in justice in the world, but if they are consistent, they'd know that there cannot possibly be any true justice, since morality is just a human construct. From their perspective, there can be no "objective good" because there is no true, universal standard of good that comes from outside us. Only God can supply that.

The old atheists like Nietzsche, who influenced Adolf Hitler, at least were more consistent. Unlike Hitchens, they didn't display moral outrage over atrocities like ethnic genocide. They realized that, from their perspective, there simply was no fixed moral standard from which to critique such actions, even if many find them to be heinous. Neither was there any basis for transcendent beauty or meaning (only a subjective beauty or meaning that each defined for himself).

As a result, the writings of men like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are basically depressing.^{††}

Our moral core—our conscience—makes the most sense within the Christian worldview, where it is understood to be a reflection of God’s nature that we, as God’s image bearers, have hardwired into us, no matter how much our corruption may have warped it.^{‡‡}

Plenty more could be said on this topic, but the bottom line is that the story of Christianity is *intellectually credible*. But more than that, it is *deeply satisfying*. C. S. Lewis once said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”² Life (even the academic pursuits of biology or physics) makes more sense from the framework of Christianity than from any alternative framework.

Particularly at secular colleges, face the fact that you’ll be swimming upstream. Your beliefs will be questioned if not overtly attacked in most academic disciplines.^{§§} Your Christianity won’t relieve you from conflict; it will guarantee that you have it. But *your* belief is the one that consistently

^{††} Dinesh D’Souza, in his thoughtful book *What’s So Great about Christianity*, has a chapter where he documents the millions of people who have been killed throughout human history under the direct influence of atheism. You may have heard that many have been killed “in the name of the Christian God.” There have been some sad cases (e.g., the Salem witch trials), but they pale in comparison to the atrocities wrought as the overflow of atheistic thinking. Hitler had no reason to believe the Jews had any dignity. Stalin and Mao could murder their tens of millions, since of what value were these lives, anyway? Christianity teaches that every human being has enormous value as an image bearer of a holy and righteous God. In fact, God instituted capital punishment in the Bible because of the high value he places on his image, which marks every member of humanity (Genesis 9:6).

^{‡‡} For more on this line of reasoning, see the classic book by C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, or Francis Schaeffer’s Trilogy, composed of three great works on a common theme: *The God Who Is There*, *Escape from Reason*, and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*.

^{§§} With the possible exception of applied, professional courses. Engineering professors are apparently less likely to be atheists or agnostics than biology, chemistry, physics, or geology professors. It can also be pretty tough on the liberal arts side.

coheres with reality. Your non-Christian friends—trying to make sense of the world and develop a moral framework—are the ones who are truly conflicted. Be sustained by a deepened faith in Christ, and speak words of truth and life to them.

At Christian colleges, you'll want to be aware that there may be a measure of theological diversity among the faculty. Some may subtly undermine the authority of the Scripture or the exclusivity of Jesus Christ. It is wise to stay connected to your parents, youth pastors, or other mentors who can help you work through new ideas. College is a great time to really examine what you believe and why you believe it. But remember what G. K. Chesterton once said: "The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid."³ *Perpetual* uncertainty is not a virtue. Yet precisely such uncertainty is promoted in our day under the guise of "tolerance."

THE "TOLERANCE" ISSUE

Before we go on to talk about moral challenges, let's hit on an intellectual challenge that is particularly big in our day, especially on the college scene: the issue of "tolerance."

In a 2007 Associated Press (AP) poll among thirteen- to twenty-four-year-olds,⁴ about 68 percent agreed with the statement "I follow my own religious and spiritual beliefs, but I think that other religious beliefs could be true as well." Only 31 percent agreed with the statement "I strongly believe that my religious beliefs are true and universal, and that other religious beliefs are not right." And generally speaking, these

were religious people. Of those surveyed, 44 percent said that religion was “very important” to them, and only 14 percent said that religion played “no role” for them. The others were somewhere in between.

So here we have a group of mainly religious people—people with specific religious beliefs—most of whom think that other religious beliefs could also be true. You’ve probably heard the phrase “What’s true for you is true for you, but what’s true for me is true for me.”

And as a society, isn’t agreement with that concept considered a necessary ingredient for being “tolerant”? But is that really how we should understand the concept of tolerance? *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines *toleration* as “the act or practice of allowing something” and *tolerance* as “sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one’s own.” To be tolerant is to allow people to believe or do things that you don’t agree with. But the very lack of agreement means that *you think they are wrong*. So to tolerate someone, you need to think they are wrong, but be willing to accept them or allow them to be that way. Perhaps an example will help.

My agnostic friend Josh and I used to discuss religion and science all the time. We got along well and treated each other respectfully, though, of course, he thought I was wrong, and I thought he was wrong. We respected each other without ignoring the ocean between our perspectives. Josh knew that I thought he was going to hell unless he repented and followed Jesus. In fact, he respected my willingness to express

my convictions to him because he recognized that, given my perspective, that was the most loving thing to do. And I was committed to treating him with kindness and respect. I had no desire to force him to conform to my beliefs and practices.¹¹ He treated me in the same manner. That's real tolerance: vigorous disagreement combined with a gracious demeanor, respect, and kindness.

The sentimental "tolerance" of our day suggests that relational harmony requires that truth be relative: what's true for me need not be true for you. Only then can we get along. But real tolerance involves treating others with kindness and respect while *at the same time* believing them to be in serious error. After all, don't many so-called tolerant atheists and agnostics think we Christ followers are in error for embracing religious absolutes, like the view that Jesus Christ is the only way to God? In fact, the one thing they are absolutely sure of is that there are no absolutes. They don't realize that such a statement is itself a claim to absolute truth. By the same token there is nothing unloving about believing that someone else is wrong. In fact, if Christianity is true, telling others they need Jesus is the most loving thing to do. Even Josh agreed on that one.

So practice true tolerance with your non-Christian friends. Like you, they are made in the image of God and have many

¹¹ In fact, I told him that it was essential that he not be compelled to change his mind except voluntarily through the use of reason. I would oppose any reduction on the rights of Muslims, Hindus, and atheists to continue to believe what they believe if that's what they wish to do. It's a whole other topic, but there are some people who think that Christians are trying to take over America (if not the world) and forcibly impose their beliefs on everyone else. It's pure nonsense. By definition, true Christianity cannot be spread by force because it requires individuals voluntarily declaring their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

wonderful attributes as a result of God's common grace. Share meals, play sports, and study with them. As opportunities present themselves, show them the inconsistencies in their worldviews. Winsomely present arguments for the Christian faith (2 Corinthians 5:11; see Paul's example in Acts 26), maintaining an awareness that, though you must appeal to their minds with reason and logic, God must open their eyes to see what you've seen (2 Corinthians 4:3-6).

MORAL CHALLENGES TO CHRISTIANITY

Particularly at secular colleges, be prepared for an enormous opportunity to absolutely destroy your life through careless living. I say that with all seriousness. The biggies are generally sex and alcohol, and they increasingly go together on the college campus—sometimes even at Christian colleges.

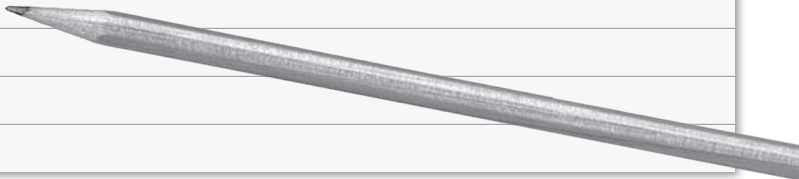
The Christian faith is strong enough to build your life on. In God's Word, we've been given "everything we need for a godly life" (2 Peter 1:3, NIV). God's teaching about sexual purity before marriage is for our own good and for our long-term happiness (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5). God's teaching about the dangers of drunkenness is for our own good and for our long-term happiness (Proverbs 23:31-35). God isn't some cosmic killjoy looking to rob you of all the fun in this world. He wants to maximize your deepest happiness in this life and in the one to come. Many of the deepest joys require saying no to lesser pleasures that would only kill your ability to enjoy the real deal.

Imagine a delicious meal at your favorite restaurant. What

Q: *I struggle with how to live out my faith when I'm surrounded by nonbelievers. When should I say something, and when should I let it go? When should I bring my faith up, or when should I let my light shine in my actions?* —GRACE, FRESHMAN, Finance

A: Those are tough calls to make. Some of us are too pushy and aggressive with our non-Christian friends, needlessly driving them to be less interested in Jesus. Others are so careful to avoid stepping on anyone's toes that their non-Christian friends never hear about Jesus.

How much the other person is ready to hear generally depends on where they're at in life, the depth of our relationship with them, and the context of a particular conversation. We need to be good listeners as well as clear presenters of the gospel. We also need to fight the fear of rejection. If other people are really our friends, they'll care to know what we believe, if for no other reason than that they care about us. We can present our faith in a manner that doesn't convey that they're just a conversion project (2 Timothy 2:24-26). We're just sharing our perspective, and we can respectfully explore areas of disagreement. We can communicate that we care about them even though we disagree. In fact, it's because we care that we want them to know about Jesus.



if I told you that I was going to take you there tomorrow night? Six thirty sharp, I'm driving, and (most important) I'm buying. Let's say your sister comes home at five and says, "Hey, I was hungry and went to Burger King on the way home. Picked up some extra French fries for you. You want some?" Hmmm, yummy. You want them. They *would* taste good. But . . . if your brain is on, you would say no. Why? Because *something better is waiting at six thirty*. You can delay an immediate pleasure if you really believe that a greater pleasure awaits you. *The key is to remember (and believe in) that greater pleasure.*

That's how God's commandments work. Every one of them was meant to help us avoid destroying our capacity to enjoy the greatest pleasures. The pleasures of sin are immediate, but afterward come negative consequences such as relational distance, disharmony, loneliness, emptiness, or even physical sickness. You do it, you enjoy it, but then physical and/or emotional pain and guilt follow. From that pain eventually comes the temptation to escape by doing it again, and the cycle repeats itself. That's what the hookup scene is all about. In fact, it often comes with binge drinking to numb the pain and the loneliness. But those behaviors create an addictive pattern that can make it more difficult for you to develop trust and intimacy in an exclusive, lifelong, monogamous commitment.

Resolve *now* not to go there. But don't just say no; say yes to something better. Decide now to form strong friendships with like-minded peers who share your ideas of a good time.

There are so many healthy, exciting ways for recreation in college that don't involve experiencing the chemical, mind-altering, and addictive behavior brought on by alcohol and casual sex (with their associated headaches and heartaches). We'll talk more about the importance of choosing good friends in part 2.

THE SAD CASE OF (CURIOUS) GEORGE

We've talked about the intellectual challenges that Christian students often face in college, particularly at state universities or other secular campuses. And we've also talked about the moral dangers, particularly the Greek or party scenes, which can be incredibly overrated, depending on the college.

Now let's hit on an interaction between the two that might take you by surprise: Sometimes, intellectual "problems" with the Christian faith are nothing more than a smoke screen for serious moral problems. People come up with objections to the faith in an attempt to rationalize behavior they know runs counter to God's moral law. In these cases, the problem is located in the head *and* heart, but mostly in the heart.

I remember my old friend George (not his real name). George went to Rice University and was a couple of years behind me. He seemed like a solid guy, identified himself as a Christian, had a good Christian background, etc. George had a hometown girlfriend who arrived at Rice the same year he did. It took a few months for us to realize that, especially for a pair of freshmen, they seemed . . . well, a bit too into each

other. They chose the same major, took all the same classes, always studied together, came and left the cafeteria together, went to church together. They were seemingly inseparable. They even lived in the same dorm building.

Over time, George and his girlfriend became less interested in developing their relationship with Christ or attending church or any other corporate expression of their faith. Their hearts drifted away from Jesus Christ and exclusively toward each other. Unfortunately, nobody felt comfortable asking the obvious question until it was too late. As you might have guessed, they had been spending so much time alone that their sexual purity was being sacrificed. And though neither one would have overtly admitted it, they knew what they were doing was contrary to biblical teaching. So—and here’s the subtle part—they began to question the moral “narrowness” of Christianity. How could something that felt so right actually be wrong? After all, they loved each other and planned to get married someday. And why bother trying to figure out what God would say about it or asking others, like their pastor, what they thought? They figured people at church just wouldn’t understand.

I graduated and ran into George a couple of years later. His spiritual condition had deteriorated. In addition to questioning the Bible’s teaching on sexuality and marriage, George could no longer accept the Bible as a reliable standard, and he bristled at the idea of Jesus being the only way to God. His arguments against the Christian faith were little more than an attempt to justify what he wanted to do until

eventually Christianity no longer had any meaning or interest for him.

Factoid

Did you know that 70 percent of young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year in high school will stop attending church regularly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two?⁵

APATHY INDICATES IDOLATRY

You'll also meet plenty of folks whose morality is contrary to the Bible, and they can't be bothered to come up with intellectual objections to Christianity. They simply don't care. In my experience at a secular university, the majority of my non-Christian acquaintances didn't have detailed, philosophically sophisticated arguments against Christianity. They just had no interest in Christianity being true because they simply wanted to live life their own ways. This is exactly what Romans 1 warns us of:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly

perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Romans 1:18-21)

Like George, they've pushed out God "by their unrighteousness," suppressing the truth. That's why it is especially important that you keep your conscience clean if you do go through phases of intellectual doubt at college, as many of us do. That way you can allow the honest questions to drive you deeper into your relationship with Christ, increasing your assurance (like the Bereans in Acts 17:11). And you won't be allowing any particular sin to attach itself to you, pushing you away from Christ.

MAKE JESUS YOUR TREASURE

Christianity doesn't just make sense; it provides a firm basis to build your college years and your entire adult life upon. Here's what Jesus said:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them

will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:24-27)

To build your life around God's Word (Jesus' teaching + the rest of the Bible) is to build your life on a *firm foundation*. Christianity is a worldview; its Truth has applications for every area of your life. Putting Jesus in a compartment is not really an option. Going beyond how to avoid getting derailed by intellectual doubts or sinful choices, let's talk about how to practically build your life on the truth of Jesus Christ and what he has done for you.

In Matthew 13, Jesus taught a pair of two-sentence, back-to-back parables that are fascinating: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then

in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:44-46). Jesus is comparing the Kingdom of Heaven to a treasure worth more than every other treasure, a treasure worth letting go of everything else to get.

The treasure and the pearl were of greater value than anything else the man and the merchant possessed. We see the

To build your lives around God's Word (Jesus' teaching + the rest of the Bible) is to build your life on a firm foundation.

opposite value system in the story of the rich young ruler. Jesus told him, “One thing you still lack” (Luke 18:22)—the treasure, the pearl, Jesus. The ruler needed to open his hand, let go of his money, and take hold of Jesus. And he wouldn’t do it! Why? Because he didn’t realize how great a treasure Jesus was.

The question we all have to ask ourselves is this: Is God going to occupy a compartment of my life, or will he be *central*? It can be nice to have God in a neat, safe place where he can comfort us when we’re lonely or confused, but not really interfere with us when things are going our way. But then he’s more our copilot (as the bumper sticker says) than our Lord and Treasure. And that kind of faith is a facade; it’s not the real thing. Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Obeying Jesus is not an option for the Christian; there is no such thing as a nonpracticing Christian.

God doesn’t just want a *place* in your life; he wants your *entire* life. If he’s not Lord of all, then he’s not Lord at all. Don’t squeeze God into your plans; find your place in his plan.

Keep college in perspective. It’s not just a place to be intellectually challenged or to have the most fun you’ll ever have in your life. It’s not just a place to hear cool speakers or to have amazing, famous professors. It’s not only a place to find a spouse or build a professional network. *College is a temporary season of academic preparation and growth so that you can serve God more effectively with the rest of your adult life.* If

you've chosen to go to college, then *God's plan is that college be a springboard into all that goes with responsible Christian adulthood.* Consider every commitment you make, every activity you sign up for, every class you choose, in light of the greater purpose of why you are at college: to develop the gifts he's given you so as to live a life of maximum Kingdom impact.

Knowing that college is a launching pad—a season of preparation—gives you perspective and shapes your priorities. Godly priorities will help you say no to things that take you off the track of where God is leading you. And I'm not just talking about saying no to immoral things, but about saying no to some *good* things that just aren't for you. You only have so much time in the day, the week, and the semester. Discernment will flow from a sense of who God made you to be, as a Christian with unique interests, talents, skills, and long-term desires. These will guide you as to what classes to take, what major to pursue, what clubs to be a part of, what friends to spend time with, and more. God already has good works prepared for you to do (Ephesians 2:10); you need to prepare for them.

But how should we practically go about balancing our

College is a temporary season of academic preparation and growth so that you can serve God more effectively with the rest of your adult life. . . . Consider every commitment you make, every activity you sign up for, every class you choose, in light of the greater purpose of why you are at college.

priorities? We'll tackle that question in the next chapter, where we unpack the mistake of assuming college is just like high school.

CONCLUSIONS

Many find college to be a season in which their Christian faith is put to the test like never before. You may be under the influence of professors with secular agendas and classmates who make immoral decisions. But don't chuck your faith at this critical time. Instead, grow closer to God by pursuing a greater understanding of your faith and wrestling honestly with any doubts. The Christian faith is grounded in historical events and has been faithfully passed down to us through reliable Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments. Christianity also makes good sense of the world; it satisfyingly gives meaning to our innate longing for truth, beauty, and goodness. Don't buy into the wishy-washy concept of "what's true for you is true for you." Recognize God's commandments were made to increase and intensify your long-term happiness—to help you see through the lies of deceptive pleasures that would rob you of greater, deeper, more satisfying joys (Psalm 16:11). Make Christ your treasure, and build your life around the truths found in God's Word.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. What intellectual doubts have you had (or still have) about the Christian faith? What have you done (or what are you doing) to address them?
2. Have you ever talked to a non-Christian friend who said you were “intolerant”? How did you handle that? Have you ever met people who speak of “tolerance” but who aren’t very tolerant themselves?
3. Do you agree with the phrase “a Christianity not practiced today becomes a Christianity that is absent tomorrow”? Why or why not?
4. Are there any areas in your life where you are making moral compromises?
5. How are you seeking to live from the foundation of your Christian faith?

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CONCLUSION: DON'T WASTE YOUR COLLEGE YEARS: GET READY FOR THE REAL WORLD

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APPENDIX 1: THE COLLEGE SELECTION PROCESS

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APPENDIX 2: DO YOU OWN YOUR CHRISTIAN FAITH?

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