

McCALLIE

— HONOR TRUTH DUTY —



Small Habits, Big Results

Convocation Remarks

by Head of School Lee Burns '87

Wednesday, August 13, 2025

On September 21st, 1905, 43 boys, four teachers, and two co-headmasters gathered here for the first day of school in the history of the McCallie School. 120 years later, we begin another school year, though with 986 boys from 25 states and 20 countries, and with a full-time faculty and staff of 202 men and women.

Whether this is your first time attending convocation or your seventh, I want you to know you are in a place of purpose, of tradition, and of transformation. A place where boys become men—not just by growing taller or stronger, but by growing wiser, deeper, and truer.

You sit this morning on land where, in 1863 during the American Civil War, young men battled and sacrificed for ideals and principles that would shape our country and its upward path for justice, freedom, equality, and opportunity. You sit on a land that was once a farm, which provided nourishment and sustenance to many through careful planning and hard work. You sit near the spot of the home in which Pastor Thomas Hooke McCallie and his wife Ellen raised their 16 children, two of whom would found this our school, whose founding and enduring mission would be the glory of God in Christ as it provides extraordinary academic and extracurricular programs to boys on their journey to manhood. And you sit on the side of a Ridge—a steep slope upward demanding exertion, commitment, and resolve to reach a vista on higher ground.

You are part of something much bigger than yourself—a brotherhood, yes—but also a legacy. For more than a century, boys like you have walked these halls, faced their fears, chased their goals, and wrestled with what it means to be a man of honor, truth, and duty, and how to glorify and enjoy God. But I know as you sit here this morning, filled both with excitement and anxiety, you are more focused on the upcoming year than the rich history and traditions and compelling mission that has shaped McCallie for over a century. You are rightly more focused on what your teachers will be like, and if will you like them, and who will you sit with at lunch today as you approach day one of the school year.

But let me push past day one and ask you this: Who do you want to be by the end of May, by the last day of school, or even by your graduation one day on a distant May morning?

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Who do you want to be? I'm not talking about your grades or GPA, your goals, or the goals you score. I'm talking about something different...deeper.

A couple of weeks ago, my wife Angie and I had the football team up to the house for Fourth Meal. I talked to them about their upcoming season. I told them that it's fine and good to have goals, but all teams do. And it's fine and good to have a burning

desire to win, but most everyone does. The same goes for getting really fired up in a game. Anyone can do that. But I said that what separates individuals and teams that flourish from those that don't are the multitude of small daily choices they make year-round that form their habits. Grit and the grind precede and are prerequisites for greatness.

And the same goes for all of us.

This morning and this year, I want you to think about this: Small daily habits, over time, can transform your life. They will, over the course of this school year, and over the course of your McCallie career, change you, transform you, into a McCallie man—a man of faith and character, of integrity and service, a man of accomplishment and excellence.

Let me give you ten habits that I believe will transform you between now and May if you will commit to them daily.

1. Pray each day.

Before the rush of school, sports, friends, or screens—start your day with 60 seconds of prayer. Ask God for wisdom, strength, focus, forgiveness, and grace.

Over time, this habit will help ground you in God's love. It will remind you that you are never alone. You will begin to notice God answering your prayers, and you will experience a peace and purpose that is otherwise elusive.

2. Do 50 pushups a day.

You don't need a gym. You need gravity and grit.

Over time, this builds physical strength, yes—but more importantly, it builds discipline, resilience, and self-respect.



3. Eat at least one vegetable a day.

It's simple, even if it's not your favorite. Successful people do uncommon things they may not enjoy. We all like cake and Coke more than carrots and cauliflower.

Over time, this habit builds a mindset of caring for the body God gave you, providing you with more energy and strength.

4. Keep your tie straight and your shirt tucked in.

Details matter. How you show up reflects how you see yourself and how you respect others. Over time, this builds a habit of excellence—and signals to others that you have good self-discipline, take your life seriously, and value the shared standards of the community.

5. Clean up after yourself.

In the dorm, the classroom, the dining hall—leave things better than you found them. Sweep up your crumbs and push in your chair.

Over time, this habit cultivates responsibility, humility, and service.

6. Thank one person each day.

A teacher. A teammate. Your mom or dad. Your dorm parent. A classmate who included you.

Over time, this builds gratitude—and reminds you of the web of people who care about you and support you.

7. Put your phone down at meals.

Look people in the eye. Ask a question. Tell a story. Laugh.

Over time, this habit deepens relationships and strengthens your ability to be present and known.



8. Do the hard thing first.

The paper you're avoiding. The conversation you're dreading. The run you don't want to take.

Over time, this builds courage—and helps you become someone who faces challenges head-on.

9. Go to bed on time.

Not just because you're tired—but because you respect tomorrow enough to prepare for it.

Over time, this habit gives you clarity, energy, and peace of mind.

10. Reflect on your day.

Each night, ask: Where did I do well? Where did I mess up? Who do I want to be tomorrow? Read a passage from the Bible or a devotional.

Over time, this makes you wise. It builds integrity, self-awareness, and growth.

Small things, done daily, lead to big changes. Don't underestimate the quiet power of consistency.

As I think about these habits, I am reminded of a teenage boy from the Old Testament—a boy who became a man, a poet who became a warrior, a shepherd who became a king. A man after God's own heart: David.

When we first meet David as a teenager in the Bible, he's not at the center of attention. He's not even invited to the big family gathering with the prophet Samuel. He's out in the fields, doing the dirty, faithful work of tending sheep. Unseen. Uncelebrated. But faithful.

God saw something in him. Not because he was the tallest or strongest. But because he had a heart that sought after God.

David's life was full of ups and downs—victories and failures. He slew Goliath with a stone. He led armies into battle. He also made terrible mistakes. But what marked David's life was not perfection. It was repentance, courage, and a heart open to God.

When you mess up this year—and you will—remember David. Own it. Turn back to God. Keep growing. Keep seeking.

In Psalm 51, David writes, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." That's a good prayer for each of us as we begin this year.

What are the habits of your heart? Of all the important habits we can cultivate each day, the most important are those of the heart. Cultivate a heart that is loving and kind toward other people, that is sacrificial and service-oriented. That is gracious and generous to others, that extends grace to them, and forgiveness, too. God promises to renew our hearts, even to give us new hearts, as His Spirit dwells within us. I hope we will have receptive hearts to the promises and goodness of God...and hearts that worship God with gratitude and awe—in chapel, in church each week, and in private time. This year, we will be talking about these and other habits of our hearts.



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Thank. Clean. Face
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Rest. Be present.

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May this be a year when you grow not just taller, but stronger in
faith. Wiser in choices. Deeper in friendships. Clearer in purpose.

And like David—may you become a man after God's own heart.

Let's run this race together—with strength, with resolve, and with joy.

As you leave this Convocation, and each day, remember that you are walking on a battlefield, a farm,
a home, and a ridge. You are surrounded by mentors and friends who will walk with you. And you are
held by a God who knows your name, your heart, and your future.

Let us journey together — onward and upward — one habit, one day, one step at a time.

May God bless you, and may God bless McCallie.

Let us pray.

