

Faithful Leadership in Public Service

Featuring Kay Coles James

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TRANSCRIPT

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Kay, thank you so much for being here with us at Cornerstone. This is your third time here. I found that out today. Right?

Kay Coles James: Yes.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: At graduation in 1999, then you spoke at my inauguration in 2021, and now here as part of the President's Fellows Program. Thank you so much. On behalf of the board, faculty, staff, students, thank you for coming, Kay.

Kay Coles James: Oh, it really was an opportunity for me to get refreshed and energized. The music was phenomenal. The students have been unbelievable. Spending time with the fellows this morning, the quality of the questions that they ask — the conversation was really edifying. Well, you mentioned something during chapel this morning about winter is coming.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And yet you left hopeful. And you shared over lunch that the hopefulness, part of it came from seeing a sea of young men and women thinking about the Lord and pursuing Him. So share with us a little of that optimism.

Kay Coles James: You know, as I stood there on the stage this morning, I looked around in that beautiful circular chapel and I looked into the faces of the young people that were all very attentive. And I said at the end, both literally and figuratively, they gave me hope. They gave me inspiration. I got far more than I gave. Because I am so concerned about where our country is, where we're headed, and the struggles that we have. But to see those incredible young people who love their Lord — who want to live their lives in faithfulness to Him, who want to be influencers in our culture and in our country — I said at the end, both literally and figuratively, I can go sit down. I can go sit down. They've got this. They've got this. So I'm leaving the campus very encouraged.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That's so great to hear. It was a blessing for me this morning, seeing you interact with 30 or 35 Kingdom President Fellows — students, our President Fellows — and hearing the questions the students were asking you. You were so gracious, and thank you for being vulnerable and transparent in sharing just your incredible life journey and giving them an opportunity to ask you questions. I was impressed with the caliber of the questions, because they were meaningful and substantive about life experience and how do you integrate your faith and challenges you've had doing that. So give me a sense of just your time this morning with the President Fellow students. These were juniors, seniors, freshmen,

sophomores. Just your impression of this group of young people and the caliber of questions they were asking you.

Kay Coles James: You know, very often when you put young people in front of interesting people for them to interact with, you are a little cautious. I took my granddaughter to the White House. She wanted to meet Ivanka Trump, and so I spent a lot of time with her working on questions, and this is an opportunity, and what do you want to ask about what it means to be a woman and how she's influencing politics and policy. And the first question out of her mouth was, "Where did you get those shoes?"

I was so incredibly embarrassed. I got none of that this morning from the Fellows. And it was fascinating to me that their questions weren't even about government or politics or public policy. Their questions were more along the lines of, how do you incorporate your faith in what you do every day? How do you follow Jesus? How have you managed to maintain your faith in this? And so they were really focused in on the spiritual side. And I found that so. And that's the right emphasis, by the way. And I was so encouraged by that. They were thoughtful. They came back with follow-up questions.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You all are doing something incredibly right here. Well, we have a great group of faculty and staff, and our board, but we always say it's really God at work. And we want God to be at work. We're instruments. Let Him be at work, so thank you so much, Kay. You know, we spoke over lunch about the importance of the Christian worldview. That's something I wrote a piece just a few weeks ago for a magazine we called Influence out of Cornerstone, and I spoke about this question of, what does it mean to be a Christian university? And I spoke about the centrality of Jesus and how that is really distilled through a Christian worldview in everything we do. You've had such an incredible career and opportunities that God has given to you throughout your whole life. Share with us about the importance of the Christian worldview. Sometimes we think it's just this academic thing we do that we integrate here, but you've lived it out in so many places. So share with us a little bit about that.

Kay Coles James: You know, it is so important to know who you are and whose you are and how that influences your life. Having a worldview is... We all do, whether we know we do or not, and it's your perspective on the world, how you view the world, how you process what you see in the world. And when you have a Christian worldview, it is not something that's over here that you practice on Sunday morning and then you go about your life for the other six days of the week. Your Christian worldview permeates everything you do. It influences your decision-making. It influences your behavior. It influences your relationships. And so as you steep yourself in scripture, as you steep yourself in the knowledge of who God is, it should permeate every part of your life and have an impact. And I shared with the students that, quite frankly, I get asked every now and then, "How in the world did you make it in and out of a life of public service for 40 years and never got indicted?" And I share with them, having a Christian worldview sort of helps out with that, because it guides everything you do. And if you go into this with the knowledge that you're gonna do excellent work at whatever it is, you're gonna do it with character and integrity, you're doing it knowing that you are representing the person of Christ in all that you do, that sort of puts a hedge of protection around you. There's certain things you just won't do as a result of that, and there are certain things that you must do as a result of that. And so having a worldview guides your life. Having a Christian worldview grounds you in life.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You said something that, during chapel, that reminded me of something that one of my graduate professors said to me at the University of Cincinnati when I was working on my doctorate. And she said — her name was Bonnie Fisher — and she said, "Enjoy this time in your life now. You will never have as much time as you do now to read and to think. So do it now, because once you leave this place, it's gone." And I remember thinking years afterwards, "She was right." You said something very similar to the students this morning. The beauty of being here for whatever time you're

here, let the Word of God saturate you. But learn, study, think. So share with us more about the importance of Christian higher education at a time where it's being dismissed — in general, higher ed and Christian higher ed — how important this time is.

Kay Coles James: It is critically important, and this is where you develop the skills for life, the knowledge for life, the habits for life. And you will never have an opportunity like that. I shared with the students, sometimes as it is often said, education is wasted on the young. I wish someone would give me the opportunity to say, "You know what? All your meals are covered. You don't have to cook. You don't have to clean. You don't have to do any of that, earn a living. All we need you to do, your job is to read and think and study and process."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Wow. What an opportunity.

Kay Coles James: We are truly preparing the next generation to lead our country, to lead the world. And so I think Christian education is so important because we must pour into these young people who are gonna shape what our country looks like, what our world looks like for generations to come. And never again will they have the opportunity to focus as much as they do right now on their studies and what they learn, but even more importantly, to develop habits that they will take with them for the rest of their lives. I remember as I was a young mom, someone said to me, "You know, children, as we raise them, we can teach them things. We can give them knowledge, but one of the best things we can give them are habits and disciplines and traditions that they will take forward." And I knew in my own life, I loved God, but boy, did I lack the discipline that I wanted to have. I had to work at making sure that I was in the Word every day. I had to work at making sure that I stayed connected to a local church. I had to work at making sure that I stayed connected to an accountability group. So I think not only is education important, but Christian education is absolutely essential for raising up that next generation of young people that's gonna lead us out of this mess.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yes. You know, the students this morning asked some of these kinds of questions. Kay, maybe you can share a little more with us now, with me now. There's a certain level of competence you have to have when you go out into the world, whether it's politics or business or any of those things. And as we discussed over lunch, we need to learn to be excellent in whatever God calls us to do. Many times people in the world will look at your excellence first, or lack thereof, before they hear anything about Jesus from you. They don't wanna hear it. Are you excellent at what you do? So it's that level of competence, but as you have rightly pointed out, there's the issue of character. You can be really competent and have no character, and it's a disaster.

Kay Coles James: That's right.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You can have great character and be not very excellent at what you do. So in your own incredible journey of life, how did you continually work at those two things?

Kay Coles James: Well, let's say that I was raised in the South during an era of segregation and was a part of integrating the schools. It was a part of my upbringing. It was a part of what was embedded in me, that during those years, in the '50s and the '60s, that you had to be twice as good in order to be equal. You had to work harder in order just to compete. So the standard of excellence was embedded in me from a very early age for a lot of, at the time, very legitimate reasons. And so I grew up knowing that the standard of excellence was twice as good. I remember when we were integrating the schools in the South, and one of the ways they tried to discourage us to go back to our segregated schools was, they... I was a straight-A student and leader in student government in elementary school, and I went to junior high and became a D, F student. And I remember going home... The NAACP actually hired tutors to help us, and we had to be excellent. And I remember one of the tutors saying to us, "You know, don't come

home crying because they didn't give you an A. Take an A. You take it from them. You make sure that your paper is so perfect there's nothing they can take off for." So I grew up with that as a part of my background. But then when I became a representative of Christ, an ambassador of Christ, when I became a Christian in my senior year in high school, I began to incorporate as well, if I am His representative here on Earth, how in the world can I do sloppy work, poor work, bad work? I must be excellent at everything I do. I've got to work harder. I've gotta put in the hours. And I tell students today, when I walk into a room, I may not be the smartest person in the room, I'm probably not, but you're not gonna find anybody that's gonna outwork me. I'm gonna get there early. I'm gonna leave late, and I'm gonna work hard in between. And I think as we represent our Lord, that's what we should be demonstrating. And I don't care what your area of expertise is. If you're an artist, be the best. If you're a ditch digger, be the best. If you're a professor, be the best at whatever it is that God calls you to be, 'cause we are representing Him.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Kay, you've been in a number of atmospheres that are, I would characterize as being intense, right? Let's go with hostile. And there is a sort of perception out there that hostility is just part of our cultural DNA right now. And that you really cannot have conversations with people who are different than you are, who don't believe what you believe, who are across the aisle politically, or whatever the case may be, and hostility is just a part of the equation, and get over it, and it is what it is. But my sense is just watching your life and hearing you speak and seeing the amazing things you've done, is that you have developed ways to break through that. And it... Not easy, but you've done it. And to have conversations with people who are different and have friendships and relationships. Share with us about that. That's so important, I think, for our future. If we're gonna take what we're doing here and go out, we have to learn, call it the art of winsomeness or the art of civic charity — whatever you wanna call it, it's absolutely essential. How?

Kay Coles James: You know, I always look for what it is that we have in common. What is it that we can start as a place of togetherness before we even talk about our differences? And it's funny to me, one of the most diverse places on the entire internet is my Facebook page. And probably the Posts that got the most attention was a post that I made about how did your grandmother fry chicken? It was phenomenal, and there were over 300 comments and responses, and I got to sit back with a sense of humor because I had people from the far, far left and the far, far right who came together around that. I had people who were multi-millionaire donors and people who were in poverty coming together and sharing around that. I had old and young. I mean, it was fascinating to me. There's always some commonality that we have and that we share. I find that it is increasingly more difficult and people don't believe it. I run a small nonprofit, and I am fiercely committed to it not being political. But because I have a political resume and because I have strong opinions on various issues, people find it difficult to believe that I truly do welcome them there. And I think we have an obligation to demonstrate as God's people what it looks like to be loving and kind and generous to a hurting and dying world. And we have to walk that out in ways that they can see and believe. And you know, I used to do a lot of work and was on the board of Young Life, and I remember an old phrase of winning the right to be heard. And every day, we have to live our lives as followers of Christ and win the right to be heard. So before I open my mouth to try to convince you of an issue or that I don't think you're right on some particular point, can we just have a relationship and maybe talk about how your grandmother fried chicken?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That's beautiful. You shared something with our students this morning that I know resonated with them. I was in the room watching them as you were speaking, and when you brought this up, I just saw a lot of heads and a lot of just intent attention to what you said. And it was, I think, probably the most vulnerable, transparent moment of the whole morning, when you shared your struggle of ensuring that you carve out time for the Word of God in your life. You're so busy doing so

many things, but as you have gone through life, you have realized the importance of it and the great need there is to carve out, and the struggle to do it.

Kay Coles James: I think that's something that all of those students resonate with and understand. I think anybody in the audience this morning would have resonated with it because our time is crowded out by so many distractions. It really is, and I shared with them the fact that as I'm aging, that influences a lot, and that I was singing that Sandi Patty song the other day — We Shall Behold Him Face to Face — and it hit me in a whole new way. At my age, that's gonna be sooner rather than later.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: We hope that's not the case.

Kay Coles James: Well, we don't know. It could be this afternoon or 20 years from now, but at my age, I'm a whole lot closer to it than I was 50 years ago. And I stopped and I went, "Ooh, ooh, I'm going to be looking at Him face to face. I need to get my act together." You know, we can get in a coasting mode. We can get in a sort of check-the-box mode. Okay, devotions, read three verses and call it a wrap and move on with the day. And when I thought about the God that I serve and the God that I'm gonna be looking at face to face, it occurred to me — You know what? I wanna be excellent at all I do. I wanna be... When I'm standing in front of Him, what do I wanna say? I didn't take time to read your love letters? I didn't take time to spend time with you. I'm so sorry. And so, it really, the older I get, the more I realize how precious that time is. And how much there is to know. You know, you can't read the Bible through one time and say, "That was a great book," and set it aside. Because it's fresh, it's new. Different things open up. God reveals through the Holy Spirit different passages and different ways. And so it is a constant refresh that we do. So it is more important to me than ever. But I look back over the years and say, "Boy, what time wasted." I in the political arena can find time to watch three different cable news shows, read four newspapers, listen to three different podcasts, and I don't have time to spend alone with Him? Something's wrong with that picture.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Kay, the kind of questions you received this morning, and I think even after chapel from students, reminded me of some questions I've received from our students my first year here and throughout. And I wanna preface this by sharing — the Pew Forum does surveys in higher ed every single year, and one of the questions they usually ask to adults is, "Do you believe that American universities are teaching people the most important stuff? Yes or no?" And usually a majority say, "No, they're not teaching them the most important stuff." And when they ask them, "What's the most important stuff?" It's usually the kinds of questions you received today, and that I've received in the past. Deeply personal. Questions about how do I live well? How do I relate well to people, right? How do I live my life faithfully to Jesus? How do I do these things? And so share with me, as a final question, your comments on why it's so important what we're doing here at Cornerstone, right? Not just a Christian worldview and excellent academics and great faculty and a beautiful campus, but also helping students to learn how to live well.

Kay Coles James: Education for life. It's tough out there. It is tough out there, and one day they're gonna walk across the stage and shake your hand and get a diploma and depart. And as I am spending time on campus and talking to the students, if I were asked that Pew question, I'd have to say that at Cornerstone they are doing it well. As I talk to the students, they are not only getting the academic education that they need, the spiritual guidance that they need, but the practical application for everyday life as well. I'm leaving here and hopping on a plane very soon, and I am feeling so encouraged. So refreshed myself. Looking out at the faces of these students, talking to them, engaging with them. We're gonna be okay. We're gonna be okay.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Kay, thank you for your incredible service to our country. Thank you for your service for the Lord and the people of God and the kingdom, and thank you for spending a full day, since early in the morning, with us here at Cornerstone. It means a great deal to us. Thank you, Kay.

Kay Coles James: As they say at Chick-fil-A, my pleasure. Thank you.

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