

Faith in Action: Education, Virtues & the American Dream

Featuring Ian Rowe

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TRANSCRIPT

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Ian, it's so great to have you at Cornerstone. You, you've become a regular. This is your second time now. Yes, it is. So thank you. First Wisdom Conversations in 2022. And now part of the President's Fellows program. Thank you so much for being a part of what we're doing here.

Ian Rowe: I am so excited to be here, and hopefully it is the first, or the first two, of many visits to Cornerstone.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: It will be. Thank you, Ian. You, this morning you met with our President's Fellows students, 25 to 30 students. And, it was just a wonderful opportunity to see students asking you profound questions about their calling and what they're thinking. But one of the things that you shared with the students this morning is how do you really leverage your Christian influence in action? You talk about faith and action. And at the, at the core of Cornerstone, we have this beautiful mission about educating influencers in the world for Jesus Christ. That's the mission. And we work really hard to bring that into action, right? Operationalize, it was your word. Can you share with us a little bit about that?

Ian Rowe: Why is that so important in your life, in your thinking, in your work? Well, Christian influence is a powerful tool, but it means nothing if it's just kind of off to the side and never really utilized. So it's one thing to proselytize, but it's a whole different thing to actualize. And one of the things in my own work, I've been called to work with children, particularly, children in vulnerable communities in places like the Bronx in New York, who are in school districts where only 7% of kids graduate from high school ready for college. And I could write about those issues and hopefully get many people to be concerned. But I also can open a school to demonstrate that you can build a great school in this community that shows that you can create an environment where 100% of the kids are not only capable of graduating from college, but excelling, going to some of the best schools and universities in the country. And I think that's one of the, the powers of, of our Christian faith, is that we want to build institutions at a time where it seems that so many of the institutions that really drive human flourishing are crumbling, whether it be the family, our religious institutions, schools. It's a time to build. And what I try to, encourage the students, the fellows to think about today, is how to take their faith, match that to their analytical ability, put those together, and then create new institutions that are serving the vulnerable or those that are not yet excelling at the highest level.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You mentioned something in chapel as well. You, when you — Beautiful, wonderful message by the way. Thank you so much for speaking at our chapel. And focusing on your

model of FREE. Freedom, religion, education, entrepreneurship. Family. Family. Thank you. Family. And, and the, what you mentioned at the very end, entrepreneurship really caught my attention because as it is a, for scholars to define entrepreneurship has always been a challenge. What is it? But you spoke about it almost as a virtue. The ability to overcome challenges. Right? A problem solver. And so educating men and women and students with that sense of overcoming and solving. Powerful. So talk with us a little bit about that, entrepreneurship piece in a day and age in which sometimes entrepreneurs get a bad, bad rap, right?

Ian Rowe: Well, I think, unfortunately many young people today are being sort of marinated in these narratives that tells them everything that they can't do in their life. Maybe because of their race or their gender or their economic class. Here are all the things that you don't have access to, and it's, it's created in some communities almost this idea of learned helplessness. That I can't control my own destiny, and I push back very hard. And, and in my view, when we're trying to help young people think about their lives, we want them to operate with a sense of agency. That they can lead a self-determined life with meaning and purpose. But it doesn't come from nowhere, and so this FREE framework is that in all of my experience, I've seen young people grow up in very challenging situations, but if they've had interaction with four key pillars, it really can change everything. And as you mentioned it, FREE: family, religion, education, and entrepreneurship. And so when I speak about entrepreneurship, it's almost the outgrowth of being really engaged in those first three. So family means that you're on the pathway to form a strong family. Religion means that you've adopted a personal faith commitment in your own life, that you live by a moral code. And education is that you've had the benefit of educational freedom. And if you have those three things, then the last E in FREE is about entrepreneurship. And when most people think of that term, they think of, oh, you're starting a business. Well, it, it could certainly mean that. But it also means being a problem solver in your own life. And this idea that everyone is going to face inevitable challenges. When that moment comes, will you have the ability to be resilient? Will you have the ability to strategically plan? Will you have what I call an overcomer's mindset? So that's what I mean by entrepreneurship, that in anyone's life, for every reason, life is hard. We will always face challenges. But the thing that you control the most is your response to external challenges. That's what you can control. And so my hope is that with a free framework, if you understand the importance of family, religion, education, and then entrepreneurship at the end, you will have the ability to, to overcome, to deal with adversity, and overcome adversity.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: One of the things you mentioned about Vertex Partnership Academies, which is a wonderful schools that, that you have founded and, and lead, there are these virtues around which the students really ground their identity and their education. And it was interesting this morning when you mentioned that courage is the most important one. In today's society, you don't hear that. You hear of social justice of some kind. Right? But I wanna talk with you about courage and, and for those who are watching, it's about courage, because moral courage is so important today.

Ian Rowe: Yes, it is. It's, it's the virtue that you need to exercise in order to practice all the other virtues.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: So, talk with us a little about that, because you, you're seeing there's not just the lack of moral courage in education K-12, but as you're seeing higher education. All that's happened just in the last two months, with antisemitism, the congressional hearings and college presidents, and as you mentioned over lunch, how, how difficult is it really to condemn something as evil as the genocide of Israel, right? The lack of moral courage. As a violation of a code of conduct. Really, it's — they couldn't even admit that. So share with us how that is going with your students, but also just in general, in all the traveling and work that you're doing, the importance of it.

Ian Rowe: So I've been running public charter schools now, in the heart of the Bronx for nearly 15 years. And something that's always been important is that you have to ensure that our students get a, a strong, rigorous academic education. They get exposure to some of the finest works in art, music, poetry, literature, science, math, a really strong grounding and foundation in academic preparation. But what has become very clear to me, certainly even more so over the last few years, is that our kids are being surrounded by almost an, an attack on their, on their character, or they, or they need to develop more character-based strengths to be able to really thrive in this world. And so as an institution, as an educational institution, we decided for our high school that we wanted to organize the entire school around what we, what are called the cardinal virtues: courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom. And they're called the cardinal virtues, the Latin, root, for cardinal is *cardo*, which means hinge. So all other character-based strengths, all other standard moral standards of excellence are based on courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom. So we felt it very important that we structure our entire school, our rituals, our canon, our curriculum. And courage is the first, 'cause courage is the virtue that you must exercise in order to practice all others. And one of the things we did, we went further than just saying, "These are our virtues." We've actually created what we call I statements. These are statements that all of our students memorize. So, so think, so think for a moment, just close your eyes. Imagine our students, almost all Black and Hispanic students, predominantly from low-income communities, standing strong in their blazers, their Vertex blazers, and they say the I statement for courage. "I reject victimhood and boldly persevere, even in times of uncertainty and struggle." Or temperance, "I lead my life with self-discipline, because I am responsible for my learning and my behavior." When our students really memorize and then, say those words, initially they're learning, they're memorizing the words. It's in their head, but over time, it starts to really take hold in their heart, and it becomes how they, how they carry themselves, how they operate in the world, how they view themselves. "I reject victimhood." No. You may be saying, or larger society may be saying, "Well, based on your skin color, based on this, based on that, you are not, you, you're not worthy, or you're not, have access." Or somehow, simply because of these characteristics, you're an oppressed class, or you're an oppressor. We reject that. And I think that's the kind of ethos that should be happening in our elementary, middle, and high schools, and in higher education. There seems to be this kind of victim ideology that, people are gravitating towards, maybe in some ways because it absolves them of responsibility. Like, if, if there's someone else, if there's someone else that I can blame for anything that may be going on in my life, then there's something very perversely comforting about that. And we like to say to our students, "No, it should be the exact opposite. You have the privilege of your own responsibility. You have the opportunity to achieve at the highest levels." And what we try to do is create a framework so that our kids know what it means to lead a self-determined life. Meaning and purpose, courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom is that framework, we think, that can help young people think about their lives, about their community, to know to do the right thing.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And you mentioned your family, your parents immigrated into the United States in 1968.

Ian Rowe: Yes. My parents did so in 1980.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Okay. And you mentioned something really beautiful. They were not running away, they were running to America.

Ian Rowe: Yes. I can say the same thing about my father and my mother.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And you spoke, and I was so grateful that you did in chapel, about the American dream. There's a, there is a lot of — it's still real — but there's a lot of conversation today about that thing. Is it even legitimate to have? Is America so broken, dysfunctional, always has been, that maybe

we, we shouldn't even think about an American dream? And yet when I arrived, I'm sure you, your experience is the same, there's something beautiful and powerful about the ideal of America. It's not perfect. It's not the, it's not the kingdom of God. We know that, but it is the place where God has brought us. And we're here. So share with us, about this question of the American dream, the ideals. How do we, as Christians, citizens of the world, or in the world but not of the world, how do we work through our salvation and fear and trembling in this wonderful land of opportunity that has to continue to be renewed and rebuilt and refined?

Ian Rowe: It's, it's very interesting. We are at a time where we live what I would consider to be the greatest, country in the world, with booming opportunity, and yet there are large segments of our society that feel that the American dream is some distant reality or belongs to someone else. And as Christians, as faith influencers, we have to step back and analyze why is it that we can look at our society and see that, that some people are thriving and others are not. There's actually an incredible study that was done a few years ago on this exact question. And it's actually called Where Is the Land of Opportunity? Because this analysis that was done took into account the records of nearly 40 million children and their parents that were born in 1980 and, and 1982 to understand where they stood economically, and they looked at those same exact people 30 years later in 2011 and 2012, and the analysis that was done was depending on where you were born and raised, what was the likelihood that you lived the American dream, that you were born in the lowest economic quintile, and then 30 years later you were in the highest, top economic quintile. And what's fascinating about this study is that they produced a map of the country to show what the likelihood of you achieving. And the first thing that you notice about this map is that it's in, there's incredible variability. In certain parts of the country, it's almost a guarantee that you're gonna end up doing better than where you were, you were born with, with your parents, and in other parts of the country, it's almost guaranteed that you're not going to live the American dream. Why? And from my perspective, this is where I talk about matching our Christian faith with, with brutal analytical analysis to see why is this? Why is it that there are certain areas that are considered a land of opportunity and others where it's just perpetual deprivation? And this study found that the three big factors that really drove, that really drove the attainment of the American Dream were one, in a given neighborhood, the presence of married two-parent households was one of the biggest factors driving upward mobility. Second, the concentration of religious individuals and involvement in civic organizations was number two. And number three was access to high quality K to 12 education. This analysis showed that if we're really concerned about the American Dream, and we have a faith commitment, and you have the courage to really look at the data and say, if we know that these are the factors that really matter, strong families through marriage, strong religious participation engaged in direct action, and strong access to educational freedom or school choice, then that should inform us as Christians as to how we want to deploy our Christian influence. And that's what I tried to speak about in, my remarks, this morning, because I think so often there is a disconnect with the so-called gatekeepers who are kind of self-appointed. "We know what's best for these people who are in challenging conditions," when in fact they have no idea what the real drivers of happiness, upward mobility really are. So all — to all of our Christian faithful, I think it's very important, carry your faith and then carry data, so you really understand the conditions upon which people are living, so we can make a, a very, good faith effort to actually address the underlying reasons why many of the conditions exist in the first place that we so are trying to eliminate.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You, you've spent all of your life, most of it in K-12 education. In just the last couple of years, I've seen a number of studies of the continual decline in the confidence the American public has in higher education, in the universities. And I speak to a lot of people every day as president of this university who share those concerns with me. Why should I invest in higher education, whether it's Christian or not? Everyone's questioning these, higher education. And yet, here we are at

Cornerstone, completely committed. We know it's one of the most important institutions human beings have ever created, universities. And we're one of those universities. And we see the incredible public value we provide to our, to our community. Share with us just your thoughts on higher education. You are K-12, but as you think about students going through your, the Vertex Partnership Academy and charter schools, and you start thinking about going beyond that, what is the value of a university like at Cornerstone, Christian high education, firmly rooted in objective truth, a Christian worldview, how, how important is that and why?

Ian Rowe: Well, I think you're absolutely right. The perception of the value of a higher education degree for many good reasons is being questioned. Whether it be if you go to a university, suddenly you're being, taught that the only thing that matters about you are these superficial characteristics like your race or your class, your gender, or you're taught to hate capitalism, or in fact, almost even hate the country. There are a lot of families that say, "Wait a minute, this is not what, we signed up for." That said, when you do have an institution of higher education that's very, very clear about what it is seeking to accomplish, what the virtues and values are that it stands for, then that could be of enormous value. So Cornerstone obviously falls in that latter category. So when you come here, you are a Christ, you are a Christ-centered student looking to ultimately leverage your Christian influence in the world, and there is a deliberate effort around that. And from my perspective, that's one of the things I think that matters most, is that is the institution that's educating your kid, are they deliberate? Are they intentional about the values, and are they explicit about the values that they're trying to inculcate into your students? That's why, for example, Vertex Partnership Academies, we've said the cardinal virtues, that's what we stand for. And so I think the more that institutions of higher education focus on the core values, its purpose to transmit knowledge, to help young people learn how to think but not what to think. Your job is not to force — indoctrinate — your, or indoctrinate your particular point of view. Let young people get all the information and then decide for themselves. The one thing I'll say, though, about higher education, and this has less to do with ideology, is that I now run, high schools in the Bronx, and one of the things we've learned is that we need to create more what we call optionality within the secondary experience. So for example, at Vertex Partnership Academies, at the end of your sophomore year, you can choose either what's called the International Baccalaureate Diploma pathway, which means a two-year course of study that really prepares you for pre-college, pre-university to any of the best schools in the world. Or at the end of sophomore year, you can choose the International Baccalaureate Careers pathway, which also prepares you to go to college, but it, and it allows you to do apprenticeships or internships during your last two years of, in your junior and senior year. So imagine, for example, we've just partnered with Northwell Hospital, which is one of the leading health providers, in New York State. Our students who've chosen the biomedical science careers pathway will have the opportunity to do an apprenticeship one day a week at a hospital, maybe in the role of a physician's assistant or a phlebotomist taking blood, and at the end of two years of their junior and senior year, they can earn a credential and in a, in a particular industry that has labor market value. And so the idea is that for some students, college immediately out of high school isn't necessarily the right answer. And so what we're offering to our students is to say, "You have multiple pathways." Some kids maybe right out of high school, college is the right answer, or it might be working for two or three years to collect some capital, become more mature, so that when you do decide to go for your higher education degree, you're much better equipped, and you have a more, clear sense of purpose as to why you're there. So I think that's something that we as a country have to grapple with, that higher education can be extremely valuable, but it may be that for some students we may need to create multiple pathways for when the right time is that they pursue that particular degree.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Ian, thank you for being at Cornerstone today. Thank you for being a part of the President's Fellows Program and all you've invested already in our mission and the lives of our students. It's so great to have you.

Ian Rowe: Thank you.

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