

NFL's Ben Watson Tackles Racism With 1 Weapon

With a healthy blend of humor and authenticity from New Orleans Saints tight end Ben Watson, Liberty University students were encouraged in Friday's Convocation to bridge the divides in our culture, racial and otherwise, for the sake of unity and the gospel.

The 11-year NFL veteran has been in the spotlight recently for a candid Facebook post he wrote following the "Ferguson decision." However, Watson is perhaps best known for a play he made as a New England Patriot in the 2005 AFC Divisional Game against the Denver Broncos. Following an interception in the end zone by an opponent, Watson ran an estimated 120 yards to stop the player at the one-yard line, preventing a touchdown. Before taking the Vines Center stage, a brief video featuring the play was shown, drawing cheers from the crowd.

Then Watson—whose stature is no less impressive sans shoulder pads and a helmet—joined David Nasser, Liberty's senior vice president for Spiritual Development, in a Q&A-style discussion.

Watson talked about his family and professional career. Nodding to his mother, who was in attendance, he shared his thankfulness for his parents' Christian influence. Though Watson has had his share of struggles, his faith has shaped the man he is today.

"When you are a believer, that is who you are, that is your essence," he said, adding that one's vocation is not separate from that. "We are God's children; we are Christians first; what we do flows from that."

He said that he feels at home at Liberty, among other believers.

Watson described his early NFL career, where he struggled with his identity in Christ.

"I felt like my self-worth was all wrapped up in football ... (as players) we are judged on what we do every single day. ... There is always the feeling, 'Am I going to make it this year ... this week ... is somebody going to take my job?'" he said.

One of the most important things he has learned over the years is to focus on who he is in Christ first.

"Make sure you know that your identity is in Christ. ... If you are not grounded, you are going to be all over the place; you are going to be like a leaf blown by the wind."

Nasser, who introduced Watson as "a modern-day civil rights activist," asked him to talk about his Facebook post, which has been shared nearly 500,000 times and has more than 860,000 likes.

Watson explained that after hearing about the decision (following a Monday Night Football matchup) and seeing the bitter reaction across the nation from both sides of the issue, he began to write down his feelings. The post is a reflection of his emotional journey—beginning with anger and frustration, and ending with hopefulness and encouragement—as he unpacked the issue in his own mind.

Though the decision evidenced the need to resolve racial tension in our country, Watson said, he also realized that something deeper was going on.

"Racism is simply a symptom," he said. "It is a symptom of a disease and the disease is sin; and it is a disease that we are all affected with from birth. And so we need to get to the core root of the problem. We can try to legislate; we desegregated, we did all those things—we needed to do all those things—we have all these different rules ... but when we don't ever get to the heart of the problem, I think that we do

ourselves a disservice.”

Watson said that there needs to be honest conversation about race in America, and that there is hope for reconciliation.

“I am encouraged because the gospel gives us hope. In Christ there is neither male nor female; there is neither Jew nor Gentile. We are all one. Until we deal with that issue, we are just putting Band-Aids on bullet wounds.”

The church needs to be on the frontlines of this change, Watson explained, and that means being authentic and eliminating segregation and prejudice in the pews.

“As the body of Christ we need to demonstrate what unity is,” Watson declared. “It doesn’t mean we all look the same, it doesn’t mean we don’t talk about race ... but it means that there is a genuine love for people that don’t look like you. There is a genuine respect for people that don’t look like you, or may not have been raised like you were.”

Watson called for Christians to pray for our nation and engage the culture like the Apostle Paul, who was knowledgeable about current issues and willing to speak the truth about them.

“We have the cure for a lot of our country’s ills, but a lot of times we feel like we don’t have a word to say ... or that somebody may not want to hear what we have to say,” Watson said. “You have the truth, share it. Share it on their platform.”

Students were impressed by Watson’s boldness, and moved by his message.

Senior Vickee Matthews said it is good that Liberty is encouraging “this kind of conversation.”

“I feel like we get all this information (through technology and social media), but we don’t know how to process it,” she said, noting that college is an important time to learn how to

navigate all that noise. "So having a collective platform like this, to see a different side of things, is beneficial in the long run. ... It's a big deal when it comes to racial reconciliation ... I like that (Convocation) is dealing with that."