

Thoughts on Competition and the Gospel

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It is a delight to greet you this beautiful morning from the Joseph Smith Building, a wonderful structure bearing the name of the greatest person to live on the earth in the past 1,900 years or so. It is a privilege to bear witness in this place that Joseph was a prophet of God, that he was chosen to reestablish the original church founded by the Savior of the world and to reestablish among men a sound understanding of the Atonement and how it can exalt women and men.

I am grateful for the privilege of discussing with you this morning some principles that I believe young men and women about to enter the professions need to understand. Much of what we learn from gospel teachings encountered earliest in life inculcates in us an appreciation for the functions of nurturing, supporting, and serving those who are near to us. On the other hand, when we encounter the teachings of social science or enter into the daily business of life, we encounter processes that seem strictly opportunistic, that seem to render us impervious to the well-being of those with whom we are forced to interact, often on a competitive basis.

Frequently heard voices teach that the former processes of cooperation and brotherhood are gospel processes, whereas the latter

processes, those that are competitive, are selfish and worldly and should be avoided by honorable people. This response finds resonance with many, but its specious appeal often proves unsatisfying to us when we stop to realize that most of us must almost always function in environments that demand competitive performance of one sort or another.

What, then, should BYU students—future leaders not only in the Church but also in society and in the professions—think about competition? Does the gospel teach us that competition is morally reprehensible?

In a broad sense, competition is life, and competition is about how we live. President Hugh B. Brown said that young people such as BYU students “are entering the greatest competition of all, the serious pursuit of life itself, the abundant life, eternal life. In this competition you must cultivate a sensitivity to the things of mind and spirit” (*The Abundant Life* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965], 341). This might be thought of as gospel competition.

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Parents compete with forces outside the family for the hearts of their children as they try to teach them to pursue education, activity in the Church, and other family values. Missionaries compete for the time and attention of potential investigators with the ideas and teachings they wish to impart. You compete to get into BYU, you compete for grades, you compete for jobs, and, having embarked on a career, you must compete for promotions and for about every kind of success. Is this competition a curse that you must constantly strive to overcome?

In my profession, competition is generally a very positive word. It is contrasted with monopoly, a situation in which a firm is empowered because it has sole dominance of a given market and can restrict its sales and charge a high price. Those who rail against large corporations or “multinationals” should be more friendly to the notion of competition; when corporations face competition, they must charge more reasonable prices and be more consumer friendly in their compartment or they lose market share as clients abandon them to purchase from more competitive firms.

One of the prophets who understood the workings of the economy and the impact of government policy was President Ezra Taft Benson, who taught that “freedom of individual choice inspires competition. Competition inspires shrewd and efficient management, which is conducive to the production of the best product possible at the lowest price” (TETB, 629).

President Benson understood how important competition is for our economy. He noted that early in U.S. industrial history:

The governments—both state and federal—by making grants and giving exclusive licenses to railroads, banks, and public utilities, created artificial government monopolies. Free competition in these fields was prohibited by law. One had to possess a certificate of convenience and necessity [i.e., a fran-

chise] to enter business, and these were given to only a select few.

The results were only to be expected. With no competition to keep these monopolies in line, prices and rates were raised until the public clamor to halt these abuses brought about the antitrust laws. The correct remedy, of course, would have been to withdraw all exclusive privileges and allow anyone who had the desire to enter into these fields of economic activity.

If every member of society and every group is allowed to compete, and if the consuming public is left completely free to select those with whom they do business, the public will always be served by those who offer the best product at the cheapest price. [TETB, 680–81]

But let us go back and address the issue of competition from a more general viewpoint. Let us ask four questions about how competition relates to us. Should we as Church members compete? If so, how should we compete? Against whom should we compete? When should we compete?

I. Should We Compete?

Of course. If I were to say no, this talk would already be over and far too short. Competition is as essential to personal growth as, for example, interdisciplinary studies are to the progress of humankind. It can help us to expand our mental capacities as though we were, for example, majoring in international or area studies at the Kennedy Center.

The Apostle Paul used the notion of competition to describe how we should live our lives and how he had lived his. Toward the end of his mortal probation, he compared his life to a battle and a race in the same sentence:

For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith:

Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness. [2 Timothy 4:6–8]

Competition has received a bad name in part because it is so intense and, too often, so unprincipled. In the world, the opportunistic drive for material advantage can become—I am told by those who engage in the struggle—even vicious and immoral. It is imperative that we do not lose our spiritual balance, our spiritual foundations, and be caught up in the worldly race for wealth and power. I suppose that far too many of us do, and having some measure of success in this endeavor, we then delight to engage in conspicuous consumption to demonstrate our worth. But those who bear the material burdens of excessive success are not for us to judge. We do not know the hearts of the rich, who almost certainly do not have a monopoly on sin.

Life offers us the opportunity to choose our material objectives and how we will compete as we pursue them. Even our spiritual leaders have not been asked to leave the race to withdraw behind cloistered bastions of hallowed retreat. They, too, hear Paul's challenge: "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain" (1 Corinthians 9:24).

King Benjamin teaches the same principle. For him, life is a marathon rather than a sprint, and we should persevere in that race:

And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order; for it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength. And again, it is expedient that he should be diligent, that thereby he might win the prize. [Mosiah 4:27]

II. How Should We Compete?

You, my young friends, are the promise of the Church. You are the promise of the world. As the world's forces render virtue and integrity ever more scarce, you are and will be in great demand. Leadership and labor mar-

kets will increasingly value the character, talent, integrity, and capacity you are acquiring. As you magnify yourself, you also magnify the Church. Living your life properly is the way you can help build the kingdom.

An officer of Goldman Sachs, a leading investment brokerage company, recently called me, and because I was out of town, he left a voice mail message with a name I recognized as one of my former missionaries. I called the man back and offered to provide a reference for this individual but was informed that that was the last thing he needed. The young man had been hired about four years ago as he graduated from BYU. The Goldman Sachs manager called me merely to update me and report how this young, new employee was doing. And what a report it was. I was told that this former missionary was a "star of Wall Street," the "brightest young man we ever hired." I thought this businessman was simply given to superlatives until I heard more of the story. This BYU graduate had gone to work for Goldman Sachs, then had been hired away by Merrill Lynch. After about a year Goldman Sachs managed to hire him back, but it cost them about as much as the university pays for three or four finance professors. Now, the manager told me, they were really worried because this young man will be taking a leave to get an MBA at Harvard this fall, and they are afraid some other firm will hire him away when he completes his degree.

How impressed I was to get this report. I suspect a big part of this young man's bright future is not only his talent but the fact that he is trustworthy. How important it is that he be not only professionally good but morally so as well. How impressed I was that he would walk away from the kind of money he was making to pursue further education. Too many young people come to believe that education's sole value is in providing a good job with a substantial income. These things are obviously not his motivation; he seeks education because he

is anxious to improve himself. He is in fierce competition with himself.

Many of you anxiously seek some of the same rewards that have come to this young man. I remind you that you needn't take shortcuts to such rewards. They will come to you as you do the right things and do honor to your family, to your community, to this university, and to the Church.

As you go forward, pursuing your place in life, I would encourage you to remember the covenants that you have made and will make in the temple. Of those, let us ponder for a moment the idea of consecration:

Consecration is a current obligation, not a promise to wait for the reestablishment of the United Order. It can be lived today as you dedicate your life to the Lord's service. You can do this by

- choosing a service-oriented career that you enjoy;
- using your profession first of all to serve your fellowman;
- acquiring resources to build your family and the kingdom of God; and
- finally, by being prepared to share not only your money but also your time, using it to pursue the kingdom-constructing activities of nurturing and cooperation.

What a difference you can make in this world by competing—where competition is called for—with honor and integrity and by serving in the kingdom with the kind of excellence that competition engenders. It is important that you do so, without worrying about the scale of the service. If you are able to serve diligently and well, even if only in what appear to be very modest places, that will suffice.

III. Against Whom Should We Compete?

We are really competing against ourselves, and we should do our best. Contrast the Lord's system to that of the world. Because the world can give away only the wealth and privileges

that it has, it must confer its rewards upon the competitor's productivity.

The student says, "I did my best on this test and I only got a C!"

"Sorry," says the professor.

The salesman says, "I worked weeks trying to convince this client we should get his account."

Says the boss: "I really appreciate your effort, but, sorry, you failed to get the account and I'm going to have to let you go."

When we serve the Lord, He can actually judge our hearts, so the intent of our hearts can be His measure of our performance. Because men cannot accurately measure inputs, in the face of scarce resources we must base rewards on outputs. Since God knows our hearts and thoughts, He asks only that we do our best. His system of monitoring is perfect. His choices are not troubled with the imperfect or asymmetric information that distorts human transactions, or the "moral hazard" that comes from opportunistic actions taken by those whose activities are not transparent. When some people cannot be monitored, they then begin to pursue their own interests rather than those of the individuals they represent, and then they sometimes undertake activities without proper moral values.

As we serve the Lord, remember that He requires our hearts. In July of 1837, the Lord told Thomas B. Marsh: "I know thy heart, and have heard thy prayers concerning thy brethren. . . . Let thy love abound unto all men" (D&C 112:11).

The Lord had already informed the Saints of this last dispensation that such a heart was required: "Behold, the Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind; and the willing and obedient shall eat the good of the land of Zion in these last days" (D&C 64:34).

David, a king of great power and wealth, once gave some advice to his most blessed and wise son, Solomon. He said: "And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him *with a perfect heart* and with a willing mind: for the Lord *searcheth all hearts*, and under-

standeth all the imaginations of the thoughts” (1 Chronicles 28:9; emphasis added).

It is true that life constrains us, almost continually, to compete in various ways with many other individuals. If we retain the right attitude toward others, such competition need not be destructive to our feelings toward or our relationships with them. Competition can be professional rather than personal. Those with whom we compete can become our friends, and with mature attitudes we can compete in a positive and healthy way. Our primary concern must not be the victory but only that we do the best we are capable of doing. Placing the victory first tempts us to use opportunistic means to extend our natural capacities. Placing personal excellence first permits us, on occasion, to lose the battle to more talented competitors but places us in good stead, if we endure to the very end, to win life’s war.

In the world we measure success by rankings. During the cold war the technology competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union called forth, among other things, an automobile race to see which of the two countries could build the faster car. The day after the two-car race, the headline in the Soviet party newspaper, *Pravda*, proclaimed: “Soviet Car Comes in Second in Major International Competition.” The subheading read: “American Car Next to Last.” Beware of basing your life on rankings.

IV. When Should We Compete?

Unfortunately, we may and must compete—or at least often compete—when we are on the job and in certain other competitive activities. There are times to cooperate and there are times to nurture. Within a team we cooperate, and when our team is competing, we are both cooperating and competing.

In some institutions we don’t compete: we cooperate, build, uplift, strengthen, encourage, and nurture. The family and the ward, for example, should never be thought of as highly competitive places.

In the Church, in the family, sometimes even in a well-crafted business organization, we win only when we win together. When one person excels, we shouldn’t be jealous or feel defeated because we did not personally have the victory. With the right perspective, we can share in the victory as we rejoice in the achievements of our brothers and sisters in the family, in the ward, and in the human family.

We need not feel that there is only so much room for good in the world and that we are in competition with everybody in producing it. There simply cannot be too much good in the world, too much productivity, or too much creativity. We need not feel envy for the successes of others.

If we are glad when others go wrong because that improves our competitive position, we need to heed what Elder Boyd K. Packer has said:

“We get conditioned to the idea that only one team or one person can win. This is not true of spiritual things. There is plenty of room in the Celestial Kingdom for everyone. We are not in competition for some few spaces. The only one we are in competition with is our former self.” [Quoted by Neal A. Maxwell in *Wherefore, Ye Must Press Forward* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 107]

The world has limitless demand for productive and creative workers, citizens, and people. Every good act makes the world better, and we should be grateful for and appreciative of every individual thus contributing. Seeing competition in this way, we should always compete, we should always be striving to improve the human situation—spreading the good effects of our endeavors across a broad spectrum of humankind.

We should remember that it is winning the war that is really important. Many individual battles can be lost without permanent damage. In fact, some of life’s greatest lessons and most dramatic personal progress come from losing some of life’s individual battles.

In 1976 I was at the University of Arizona and so was in a position to notice a sports drama that taught a valuable lesson. The University of Arizona had an excellent baseball team, but Arizona State was to them what a certain northern stepsister institution is to us. That year the University of Arizona Wildcats were able to beat about every team they played, with the exception of the team they wanted to beat most of all. They played a three-game series against Arizona State University before the conference season began, losing all three games. They lost another three games on enemy turf in Sun Devil country. Finally, when they got their nemesis on their own field, they lost three straight again. By beating everyone else, however, they got into the College World Series. But they promptly suffered the first of two possible losses to Arizona State. They won other games and ultimately had to face the Sun Devils again in the same tournament. And, of course, this time they beat those Devils 5-1, after having lost to them 10 straight times previously. They thus advanced to the championship game, where they beat Eastern Michigan 7-1. This says something very clear about enduring to the very end.

Let us return for a moment to the question of how we should compete. When we must leave home and go into the harsh world, it is open to us to go with the Savior of the world, a willing partner in all righteous endeavors. When we do our best, maintain our honor and integrity, and still simply don't have the success we have longed for, we need not worry or let it get us down. If our partner permits us to suffer defeats, it is because He has the ability to focus on longer-term plans or because He wants us to learn some additional lessons. When He is our partner it doesn't matter whether we win all the battles. We will win the war.

We see this all through the history of man's relationship with deity. When Israel faced the apparently impossible task of defeating the hosts of the peoples of the promised land, one of the first lessons they learned under Joshua was that the Lord would fight their battles with them and that whatever temporary setbacks might be experienced, they would win the war. "And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the Lord hearkened unto the voice of a man: for the Lord fought for Israel" (Joshua 10:14).

But don't forget that you can't win them all. Said Solomon:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.
[Ecclesiastes 9:11]

When we remember that the war may extend beyond mortality and the rewards may be far greater than the short-term recognition, income, or influence we may have sought, we will not lose the eternal perspective we need to keep.

Competition can be won with the endurance and perseverance Paul described. Most people can compete intensely for short periods of time but cannot stay strong and patient year after year. Continuing without wearying, or even when we are very weary, we may be surprised at the harvest we shall reap by and by. It is my prayer that ours may be the race and the victory, but that it will be the right race and the right victory. I say this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.