

What Is True Greatness?

HOWARD W. HUNTER

I am happy to be with you today. Over the years the Brethren have had dreams and visions regarding Brigham Young University, yet such hopes and prophetic utterances are not self-executing. They are fulfilled by righteous and devoted people who make the prophecies come true. Your generation now shares in this responsibility. Part of your privilege while you are at BYU is not only to become acquainted with some of humanity's noblest knowledge and achievements, but to participate in personal and spiritual development in this ideal setting.

President David O. McKay once observed that

"the university is not a dictionary, a dispensary, nor is it a department store. It is more than a storehouse of knowledge and more than a community of scholars. The University life is essentially an exercise in thinking, preparing, and living." . . . It must concern itself with not only the dispensing of facts, but with the preparation of its students to take their place in society as thinking, thoughtful, and sensitive individuals who. . . come here dedicated to love of God, pursuit of truth, and service to mankind.

[Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University," *Speeches of the Year*,

1975 (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), p. 250]

For many of you, these years invested at BYU will be among the most challenging and rigorous, yet rewarding of your life. Many of you presently are happy and enjoying the opportunities given to you. Some of you are even ready for your next exam.

Yet I am concerned that some among us today are undoubtedly unhappy. Some of us feel we are falling short of our expected ideals. I have particular concern for those who have lived righteously, but think—because they haven't achieved in the world or in the Church what others have achieved—that they have failed. Each of us desires to achieve a measure of greatness in this life. And why shouldn't we? As someone once noted, there is within each of us a giant struggling with celestial homesickness.

Howard W. Hunter was Acting President of the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 10 February 1987.

Realizing who we are and what we may become assures us that with God nothing really is impossible. From the time we learn that Jesus wants us for a Sunbeam until we learn more fully the basic principles of the gospel, we are taught to strive for perfection. It is not new to us then to talk of the importance of achievement. The difficulty arises when inflated expectations of the world alter our definition of greatness.

What is true greatness? What is it that makes a person great?

The World's Heroes

We live in a world that seems to worship its own kind of greatness and produce its own kind of heroes. A *U.S. News and World Report* survey of young people ages 18 through 24 revealed that today's youth prefer the "strong, go-it-alone, conquer-against-all-odds individuals," and clearly seek to pattern their lives after the glamorous and "boundlessly rich." During the 1950s, heroes included Winston Churchill, missionary Albert Schweitzer, President Harry Truman, Queen Elizabeth II, and Helen Keller, the blind and deaf writer-lecturer. These were figures who either helped shape history or were noted for inspiring sacrifice. Today among the top ten heroes are Clint Eastwood, Eddie Murphy, and Jane Fonda (see "Heroes Are Back," *U.S. News and World Report*, April 22, 1985, pp. 44–48). That brief list suggests something of a shift in our attitudes.

It's true that most of the world's heroes don't last very long in the public mind, but, nevertheless, there is never a lack of champions and great achievers. We hear almost daily of athletes breaking records; scientists inventing marvelous new devices, machines, and processes; and doctors saving lives in new ways. We are constantly being exposed to exceptionally gifted musicians and entertainers, also to the work of unusually talented artists, architects, and builders. Magazines, billboards, and television commercials

bombard us with pictures of individuals with perfect teeth and flawless features, wearing stylish clothes, and doing whatever it is that successful people do.

Because we are being constantly exposed to the world's definition of greatness, it is understandable that we might find ourselves making comparisons between what we are and what others are, or seem to be, and also between what we have and what others have. Although it is true that making comparisons can be beneficial and may motivate us to accomplish much good and improve our lives, yet we often allow unfair and improper comparisons to destroy our happiness when they cause us to feel unfulfilled or inadequate or unsuccessful. Sometimes, because of these feelings, we are led into error, and we dwell on our failures while ignoring aspects of our lives that may contain elements of true greatness.

In a short editorial written by President Joseph F. Smith in 1905, he made this most profound statement about what true greatness really is. These are his words:

Those things which we call extraordinary, remarkable, or unusual may make history, but they do not make real life.

After all, to do well those things which God ordained to be the common lot of all mankind, is the truest greatness. To be a successful father or a successful mother is greater than to be a successful general or a successful statesman. [Juvenile Instructor, 15 Dec. 1905, p. 752]

This statement raises a query as to what are the things God has ordained to be the common lot of all mankind. Surely they include the things that must be done in order to be a good father or a good mother, a good son or a good daughter, a good student or good roommate or good neighbor.

Thousands of Little Deeds

Pablo Casals, the world's greatest cellist, spent the morning of the day he died, at the age of 95, practicing scales on his cello. Giving consistent effort in the little things in day-to-day life leads to true greatness. Specifically, it is the thousands of little deeds and tasks of service and sacrifice that constitute the giving or losing of one's life for others and for the Lord. They include gaining a knowledge of our Father in Heaven and of the gospel. They also include bringing others into the faith and fellowship of his kingdom. These things do not usually receive the attention or the adulation of the world.

Joseph Smith is not generally remembered as a general, mayor, architect, editor, or presidential candidate. We remember him as a prophet of the Restoration, a man committed to the love of God and the furthering of his work. Joseph was an everyday Christian. He was concerned about the small things, the daily tasks of service and caring for others. Elder Lyman O. Littlefield was a thirteen-year-old boy who accompanied the camp of Zion when it went up to Missouri. He later narrated this incident of a small, yet personally significant act of service in the life of the Prophet. He said:

*The journey was extremely toilsome for all, and the physical suffering, coupled with the knowledge of the persecutions endured by our brethren whom we were traveling to succor, caused me to lapse one day into a state of melancholy. As the camp was making ready to depart I sat tired and brooding by the roadside. The Prophet was the busiest man of the camp; and yet when he saw me, he turned from the great press of other duties to say a word of comfort to a child. Placing his hand upon my head, he said, "Is there no place for you, my boy? If not, we must make one." This circumstance made an impression upon my mind which long lapse of time and cares of riper years have not effaced. [George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1986), p. 344]*

On another occasion, when Governor Carlin of Illinois sent Thomas King, sheriff of Adams County and several others as a posse to apprehend the Prophet and deliver him to the scandalous emissaries of Governor Boggs of Missouri, Sheriff King became deathly ill. At Nauvoo the Prophet took the sheriff to his home and nursed him like a brother for four days (Cannon, p. 373). Small, kind, and significant acts of service were not occasional to the Prophet.

Writing about the opening of the store in Nauvoo, George Q. Cannon records:

The Prophet himself did not hesitate to engage in mercantile and industrial pursuits; the gospel which he preached was one of temporal salvation as well as spiritual exaltation; and he was willing to perform his share of the practical labor. This he did with no thought of personal gain. [Cannon, p. 385–86]

And in a letter, the Prophet said:

The store has been filled to overflowing and I have stood behind the counter all day, distributing goods as steadily as any clerk you ever saw, to oblige those who were compelled to go without their Christmas and New Year's dinners for the want of a little sugar, molasses, raisins, etc.; and to please myself also, for I love to wait upon the Saints and to be a servant to all, hoping that I may be exalted in the due time of the Lord. [Cannon, p. 386]

George Q. Cannon then comments:

What a picture is presented here! A man chosen by the Lord to lay the foundation of His Church and to be its Prophet and President, takes joy and pride in waiting upon his brethren and sisters like a servant. The self-elected ministers of Christ in the world are forever jealous of their dignity and fearful of showing disrespect to their cloth; but Joseph never saw the day when he did not feel that he was serving God and obtaining favor in the sight of

*Jesus Christ by showing kindness and attention
“even unto the least of these.”* [Cannon, p. 386]

To be a successful elders quorum secretary or Relief Society teacher or loving neighbor or listening friend is much of what true greatness is all about. To do one’s best in the face of the commonplace struggles of life, and possibly in the face of failures, and to continue to endure and persevere with the ongoing difficulties of life—when those struggles and tasks contribute to the progress and happiness of others and the eternal salvation of one’s self—this is true greatness.

Things of the Greatest Worth

I am reasonably assured all of you want to achieve a measure of greatness in this life. Many of you want to be leaders in your chosen fields—corporate presidents, statesmen, musicians, or artists. We encourage you to achieve. At the same time we encourage you to remember who you are. Don’t let the illusion of fleeting worldly greatness overcome you. Many people are losing their souls to such temptations. All one needs to do is look at the recent scandals uncovered on Wall Street. Your good name is not worth selling for any price. True greatness is to remain true—“True to the faith that our parents have cherished, true to the truth for which martyrs have perished” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 254).

I am confident that there are many great, unnoticed, and forgotten heroes among us today. I am speaking of those of you who quietly and consistently do the things you ought to do. I am talking about those who are always there and always willing. I am referring to the uncommon valor of the mother who—hour after hour, day and night—will stay with and care for a sick child while her husband is off to school. I’m including those who always volunteer to give blood or volunteer to work with the elderly. I am thinking about those of you who faithfully fulfill your priesthood and

church responsibilities. I am thinking of the student who writes home regularly to thank Mom and Dad for their support.

I am also talking about teachers and administrators who teach and instill faith and a desire to learn in the hearts of their students—who actively work to build and mold the lives of others physically, socially, and spiritually. I am referring to those who are honest and kind and hardworking in their daily work, but who are also servants of the Master and shepherds of his sheep.

Now, I do not mean to discount the great accomplishments of the world that have given us so many opportunities and provide culture and order and excitement to our lives. I am merely suggesting that we try to focus more clearly on the things in life that will be of greatest worth. You will remember that it was the Savior who said, “He that is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:11).

Each of us has seen individuals become wealthy or successful almost instantaneously, almost overnight. But I believe that even though this kind of success may come to some without prolonged struggle, there is no such thing as instant greatness. This is because the achievement of true greatness is a long-term process. It may involve occasional setbacks. The end result may not always be clearly visible, but it seems that it always requires regular, consistent, small, and sometimes ordinary and mundane steps over a long period of time. We should remember that it was the Lord who said: “Out of small things proceedeth that which is great” (D&C 64:33).

True greatness is never a result of a chance occurrence or a one-time effort or achievement. It requires the development of character. It requires a multitude of correct decisions for the everyday choices between good and evil that Elder Boyd K. Packer spoke about when he said, “Over the years these little choices will be bundled together and show clearly what we

value" (*Ensign*, Nov. 1980, p. 21). Those choices will also show clearly what we are.

As we evaluate our lives, it is important that we look, not only at our accomplishments, but also at the conditions under which we have labored. We are all different and unique individuals. We have each had different starting points in the race of life. We each have a unique mixture of talents and skills. We each have our own set of challenges and constraints to contend with. Therefore, our judgment of ourselves and our achievements should not merely include the size or magnitude and number of our accomplishments; it should also include the conditions that have existed and the effect that our efforts have had on others.

It is this last aspect of our self-evaluation—the effect of our lives on the lives of others—that will help us understand why some of the common, ordinary work of life should be valued so highly. Frequently it is the commonplace tasks that have the greatest positive effect on the lives of others, as compared with the things that the world so often relates to greatness.

It appears to me that the kind of greatness our Father in Heaven would have us pursue is within the grasp of all who are within the gospel net. We have an unlimited number of opportunities to do the many simple and minor things that will ultimately make us great. To those who have devoted their lives to service and sacrifice for their families, for others and for the Lord, the best counsel is simply to do more of the same.

To those who are furthering the work of the Lord in so many quiet but significant ways, to those who are the salt of the earth and the

strength of the world and the backbone of each nation—to you we would simply express our admiration. If you endure to the end, and if you are valiant in the testimony of Jesus, you will achieve true greatness and will live in the presence of our Father in Heaven.

As President Joseph F. Smith has said, "Let us not be trying to substitute an artificial life for the true one" (*Juvenile Instructor*, 15 Dec. 1905, p. 753). Let us remember that doing the things that have been ordained by God to be important and needful and necessary, even though the world may view them as unimportant and insignificant, will eventually lead to true greatness.

We should strive to remember the words of the Apostle Paul, especially if we are unhappy with our lives, feeling that we have not achieved some form of greatness. He wrote:

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory;

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. [2 Corinthians 4:17–18]

The small things are significant. We remember not the amount offered by the Pharisee, but the widow's mite, not the power and strength of the Philistine army, but the courage and conviction of David.

That we may never be discouraged in doing those daily tasks that God has ordained to the common lot of man is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.