

# Choose Happiness

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Last October I was assigned to speak in general conference. I decided to speak about perfecting our lives so that we could eventually become like our Father in Heaven. In my talk I invited the Saints to participate in a spiritual exercise. I suggested that members take the time to humbly ask the Lord the question “What lack I yet?” and then wait for a prompting from the Holy Ghost.

In the weeks that followed, as I visited stakes around the Church, members came up to me and said, “Elder Lawrence, I tried the suggestion you gave in your conference talk. I asked the Lord what I needed to improve, and I got a clear answer.”

Some have even shared with me the specific direction they received from the Lord. I was interested to learn that many Saints have been prompted to “be more cheerful” or to “smile more often” or to “count their blessings.”

I am convinced that, more than anything else, our Heavenly Father wants His children to be happy.

Latter-day prophets have taught that happiness is the purpose of our existence. Joseph Smith understood this principle. In spite of all his challenges, he chose to be happy, maintaining his cheerful disposition to the end of his life.

One who knew him well described the prophet as always wearing “an unconscious

smile.”<sup>1</sup> I have known people like that—individuals who are continually smiling without even realizing it. Their faces reflect genuine inner peace.

When I speak at stake conferences, I look around the congregation for one of those happy faces to focus on. A smiling face in a crowd of strangers is a great comfort.

What is the secret of inner happiness? The obvious answer is righteous living. But besides being “temple worthy,” what are some ways that you can increase the joy in your lives? Modern-day prophets have shared helpful insights.

For example, President Gordon B. Hinckley taught that the more often a person says thank you, the happier he will be.<sup>2</sup> It might be a worthwhile experiment to keep track of how many times you say thank you in a typical day—and then to make an effort to increase it.

The theme of gratitude has been addressed by every latter-day prophet—and more often than almost any other topic. Our inspired leaders know that being grateful leads to happiness, and they are compelled to remind us.

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In the scriptures we are commanded to “thank the Lord thy God in all things” (D&C 59:7), and that means to thank Him for trials as well as for obvious blessings. If we look close enough, we discover that there is always something to be grateful for. For example, one BYU coed had the stomach flu all during Thanksgiving week, but she tried to keep a positive attitude. She recorded in her journal only these words: “I lost five pounds this week. Life is good!”

Besides expressing thanks to our Father in Heaven, President Thomas S. Monson has encouraged us to also thank our friends and family. He said:

*We often take for granted the very people who most deserve our gratitude. Let us not wait until it is too late for us to express that gratitude.*<sup>3</sup>

Several years ago there was an inspiring story in a popular sports magazine about a professional football player named Deion Branch. He was a wide receiver for the New England Patriots for eleven years, and during that time he played in three Super Bowls.

The article pointed out that many professional football players go out drinking and get “hammered” in the days leading up to the Super Bowl. They find various ways to deal with the stress, and many of these ways are not praiseworthy.

But Deion Branch had a different way of preparing himself for the big game in 2005. He picked up his phone and called every coach he had ever had. He called his junior college coaches. He called his high school coaches. He even sought out the phone numbers of his Pee Wee coaches and reached out to them. He made thirteen phone calls in all.

He called these men to say thank you: “Thank you for caring about me [enough to teach me]. Thank you for making me run stairs. Thank you for believing I could do this.” He thanked his college coach for not giving up on

him when his grades were bad. Deion stood only five feet nine inches tall, so he thanked his high school coach for never saying that he was too small to play football.

These phone conversations were very meaningful to his coaches, but they also invigorated Deion Branch. He felt so motivated that he played his very best, leading his team to victory. He was named the Most Valuable Player of the Super Bowl in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

Have you ever had a rush of gratitude come over you? Did you make a phone call or write a note or take time for a personal visit? Have you experienced the happiness that comes from saying thank you and feeling it with your whole heart?

My father died of cancer when I was just eighteen years old. I was not yet a member of the Church, and I didn’t have the sensitivity that the gift of the Holy Ghost can bring.

I never really took the opportunity to thank him for all that he had done for me before he passed away. Now I wish I had thanked him for coaching my Little League team and for teaching me not to lose my temper when our team didn’t win. I wish I had thanked him for working with me night after night when I was learning to read in the first grade. I wish I had thanked him for teaching me how to work and to value family.

Please don’t make the same mistake that I made. Thank your parents often while you still have the opportunity.

It doesn’t matter if your parents are not perfect. They still changed thousands of diapers and provided countless meals for you. They taught you how to walk and to talk and a million other things. They gave you plenty of rides and even let you learn to drive by practicing in their cars. They must have encouraged you to study—otherwise you would never have been accepted here at BYU. They deserve your heartfelt thanks, and someday you will realize it when you are doing all these things for someone else.

The prophet Nephi expressed gratitude for his parents in the very first verse of the Book of Mormon. He praised them by saying, “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father” (1 Nephi 1:1). What a sweet tribute to Lehi and Sariah.

An excellent way to express gratitude is by giving sincere praise. Praise lifts both the giver and the receiver. Mark Twain said, “I can live for two months on a good compliment,”<sup>5</sup> and most of us feel the same way.

God showed us the importance of giving praise by His own perfect example. At the baptism of Jesus, Heavenly Father announced, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

Jesus Himself gave many compliments during His ministry. Some of them are recorded in the scriptures. Remember when He first met Nathanael, who later became one of the Twelve Apostles. The Lord praised Nathanael’s honest character by saying of him, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom [there] is no guile!” (John 1:47).

When John the Baptist was in prison, the Savior made a point of praising this good man publicly. Jesus said, “Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Luke 7:28).

When the Roman centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant, the Lord paid him the supreme compliment. He said, “Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in [all] Israel” (Matthew 8:10).

And don’t forget Nephi, son of Helaman. One day when he was especially discouraged, the voice of the Lord came to him and delivered these words of praise:

*Blessed art thou, Nephi, for those things which thou hast done; for I have beheld how thou hast with unweariness declared the word, which I have given unto thee. . . .*

*. . . Behold, I will bless thee forever.* [Helaman 10:4–5]

If we truly want to emulate the Lord, we need to be looking for the good in others and then voicing it. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, of good report, or praiseworthy, we should be seeking after these things (see Articles of Faith 1:13). Praise is a precious gift that costs the giver nothing. So if you see something, say something.

In his classic talk “Beware of Pride,” President Ezra Taft Benson warned that whenever we are “withholding gratitude and praise that might lift another,” we are manifesting the sin of pride.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, when we point out the good in others, the Holy Ghost helps us discover the good in ourselves—and everybody wins.

When our six children were growing up, we often played a game during family home evening that encouraged them to give compliments. Every family member took a turn sitting in the chair that was designated the “hot seat.” Then we went around the room, and each of us said something we admired or appreciated about the person in the hot seat. For example, comments were made such as “Casey always shares his things with me,” “Brooke does her homework as soon as she comes home from school,” or “McLane is really funny; he can make me laugh when I’m having a hard day.” You get the idea.

We noticed that whenever we played this game, the Spirit would fill our home with love. I am sure that heaven approved of this family tradition because the Lord has commanded us to “strengthen [our] brethren in all [our] conversation” (D&C 108:7).

A newly called bishop understood this principle and used it to strengthen his ward members. As each family came to his office for tithing settlement, the bishop asked the father to introduce his wife and children. Fathers were invited to tell the name of, the age of, and something they especially loved about each family member.

As soon as these introductions got underway, the Spirit grew stronger and stronger in

the room. Tears appeared in the eyes of fathers, mothers, and children. Sincere compliments from parents mean a lot; sometimes they are remembered for a lifetime.

Even when a compliment comes from a complete stranger, it can make your whole day. My niece told me about a difficult time she had when she was a single college student. The whole week had been a disaster, and she was feeling lonely and discouraged. While saying her prayers one morning, she asked Heavenly Father to help her feel His love that day. After praying, she was prompted to go to the temple, so she put on a dress and fixed her hair. On the way there she passed an older woman who smiled and stopped to compliment her beautiful, wholesome appearance. The gracious stranger had no idea that a few kind words from her had delivered a message from heaven. My niece immediately felt a feeling of love wash over her and realized that her morning prayer had been answered.

An elderly widow shared a similar sweet experience with me. She opened her front door one wintry day to find a handwritten note left on the doorstep. The note read:

*I just wanted to drop you a note to tell you how much I admire you in all the roles you have played—as a mother, teacher, wife, and example of a daughter of God. Thank you for being you. From a friend and admirer.*

The anonymous note from a thoughtful neighbor took only a few minutes to write, but the message will lift that faithful widow for months to come.

Years ago President David O. McKay gave this valuable counsel to Latter-day Saints: “Start out to make somebody else happy and see how quickly your own soul is filled with joy.”<sup>7</sup>

When I was called as a General Authority, my first assignment was to move to Moscow, Russia. I was very humbled to serve in the Area Presidency, especially as I thought of the

history of the area. The countries in Eastern Europe were formerly under communistic rule, and many of the old attitudes still prevailed.

President Russell M. Nelson was assigned to advise our area. He has a wealth of experience, having opened Russia and most of the surrounding countries for the preaching of the gospel. Although he lived far away in Salt Lake City, I communicated with him on a regular basis by email or by phone while I served as the Area President. I was constantly reporting what was happening in Eastern Europe and asking for his inspired counsel.

After several weeks I began to see a pattern. Whenever I received an email from President Nelson, it contained more than just excellent advice. It always included some complimentary words and a positive message to encourage our presidency. His example made me want to lift others as he had lifted me. I learned that kindness is contagious.

I also learned that our modern-day apostles emulate the Savior in their lives, especially in the way they treat others. They are turned outward, not inward.

I remember the first time I met President Gordon B. Hinckley. I was attending a luncheon held at the Church Office Building. By some tender mercy I found myself seated at the same table as the prophet. During that lunch hour I observed that he rarely talked about himself; he was more interested in learning about others. He directed the conversation by asking questions of each person at our table. Somehow he knew that I had served as a mission president in Siberia, so he asked me how the Russians heat their big apartment buildings in the winter-time. He was a very gracious listener, sincerely interested in everyone and everything—much like the Master whom he served.

Consider the unselfish life of the Savior. Think back to the night when He was arrested in Gethsemane. Even after suffering and bleeding from every pore, Jesus was not thinking just about Himself. He was sensitive to others.

When He saw Peter smite off the ear of one of the guards, Jesus reached out, touched the fresh wound, and healed it. Keep in mind that this was a guard who had come to arrest Him. (See Luke 22:49–51; see also Matthew 26:51–52; Mark 14:47; John 18:10–11.)

When He was dying on the cross, our Lord showed more concern for His beloved mother than for His own suffering. The dying Christ used up His last bit of strength to arrange a home for Mary, asking John to care for her after He was gone. (See John 19:25–27.)

Try to imagine meeting the Savior in person. How would He greet you? Would He be slouched over, looking intently at His cell phone, or would He smile and look right into your eyes?

I believe He would call you by name and make the conversation about you. He would offer reassurance and help. Most of all, I believe He would radiate love. In the earliest account of the First Vision, Joseph Smith recorded that after having met the Father and the Son, “my soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great joy.”<sup>8</sup>

Someday we will meet Jesus and feel His profound love for us. Until then, we have many lessons to learn. There are going to be both smooth days and rough days throughout our lives, but the Lord has commanded us repeatedly to “be of good cheer.” Elder Jeffrey R. Holland observed that “we may be more guilty of breaking that commandment than almost any other.”<sup>9</sup> Sometimes we just plain choose to be grumpy. At those times we turn inward—instead of outward.

My wife and I served in Russia on Church assignments for a total of seven years. We treasure the memory of our time there, but there was one thing we could never quite get used to. Russian people on the streets and in the stores always wear a very serious expression. They avoid smiling or making eye contact with others. Their cold outer demeanor comes from living under a communist regime for many

decades. During the Soviet era, people learned not to call any attention to themselves; they just tried to blend in. Their guarded behavior in public became a part of the culture.

For this reason we were amazed at the warm greeting we received whenever we attended the branch meetings on Sundays. What a contrast! Those Russians who had joined the Church were very friendly and welcomed us with open arms. They had smiling faces, and the Light of Christ shone in their eyes.

We realized why the Church members were so kind and outgoing—because that’s what the gift of the Holy Ghost does to people. Jesus taught, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35). We learned for ourselves that the Saints in Russia were true disciples of Christ.

I was baptized when I was a young medical student at the University of Arizona. The first time I attended Church meetings at the LDS institute, I looked around hoping to find a familiar face. Thank goodness another medical student recognized me and came right over to say hello. His name was Phil Freestone. Phil sat with me and introduced me to other Church members. It is not easy to be a newcomer, and Phil’s friendship meant a great deal to me at that important time in my life. I came to understand what the Savior meant when He said, “I was a stranger, and ye took me in” (Matthew 25:35).

Latter-day Saints who are guided by the Spirit should be the most congenial people on earth. I hope the BYU campus reflects that same spirit of friendliness. Every student should feel welcome here and at the same time go out of his or her way to welcome others. It takes very little effort to say hello, but whenever you do, you make the world a better place.

Today I have pointed out a few practices that can lead to greater happiness: smiling more often, expressing gratitude, looking for and praising the good in others, welcoming the newcomer, and reaching out to those who

need a friend. Let me also share with you some practical advice found in the scriptures.

I read the account of a young man who had experienced some severe personal trials. In the course of a few months his brother died, then he lost his job, and finally his girlfriend broke up with him. Although he was feeling misunderstood by his boss and somewhat betrayed by his girlfriend, he didn't lose his faith. In fact, he prayed to the Lord for counsel because he really wanted to be happy.

After praying, he opened the scriptures, determined to act on whatever verse he found. The book fell open to section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Almost immediately he recognized a call to action contained in these words of scripture:

*Cease to be idle; cease to be unclean; cease to find fault one with another; cease to sleep longer than is needful; retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated.*

*And above all things, clothe yourselves with the bond of charity. [D&C 88:124–25]*

As the young man pondered this counsel and applied it to his own situation, he realized that he could no longer sit around moping. He needed to be anxiously engaged in a good cause, like finding another job—and another girlfriend. There was a lot about his life that he decided to change, including his sleeping habits. He also decided to begin to pray for the gift of charity. This timely advice helped him put the past behind him and look forward to the future.

All of us need a little cheering up sometimes. Book of Mormon readers are often surprised when they come to the chapter in which Nephi was grieving over his imperfections. He expressed himself in these words: “O wretched man that I am!” (2 Nephi 4:17). Most of us on a good day wish we could be as “wretched” as Nephi. His sorrowful lament makes us wonder,

“Why do good people—even prophets like Nephi—occasionally feel discouraged and unworthy?”

Let me tell you a fable about the devil that offers some perspective.<sup>10</sup> The story goes that Satan went into his garage one day and noticed that everything was a complete mess. He couldn't find what he was looking for because there were so many rusty tools lying around cluttering up the place.

Satan decided on a solution. He would have a garage sale. He cleaned up his old tools and offered them at a discount price for other devils to purchase. Some tools sold right away—for example, the hammer of hatred, the wrench of fear, and the clamp of addiction. They were very popular items.

When he was asked why he was selling off so many of his tools, Satan explained that he had decided to concentrate all of his personal efforts on bringing down the Latter-day Saints. He preferred to use his favorite tool on them. What do you think it was?

It was the wedge of discouragement. Satan boasted about it, saying, “With this one tool I can inflict major damage on the faithful. Discouragement works wonders every time—even when nothing else will. It can bring misery to the most conscientious souls—those who are striving to keep the commandments.”

Then Satan, using his favorite tool, went about whispering lies. To the humble followers of Christ he said, “You are worthless,” “You never do anything right,” “Give up,” “No one cares about you,” and “You can never change.” Sadly, many good people believed him.

There is a lesson to be learned from this fable. The devil specializes in discouraging the faithful and those who are trying to repent. For that very reason, Church members must continually lift and encourage each other.

Don't forget that Satan wants all men to be “in misery, like unto himself” (2 Nephi 9:9). Jesus, on the other hand, wants men and women to “receive a fulness of joy” (D&C 138:17).

In summary, Jesus votes for us, Satan votes against us, and we cast the deciding vote. It is my prayer that each of us will use our agency to choose happiness.

I bear my witness that our Father in Heaven loves us and wants us to be happy—even as He is happy. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Parley P. Pratt, *PPP*, 1985, 32.
2. See “First Presidency Message: A Prophet’s Counsel and Prayer for Youth,” *Ensign*, January 2001; excerpted in “Be Grateful,” chapter 1 of Gordon B. Hinckley, *Way to Be!: Nine Ways to Be Happy and Make Something of Your Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 15–21.
3. Thomas S. Monson, “The Divine Gift of Gratitude,” *Ensign*, November 2010.
4. See Rick Reilly, “Making the Right Calls,” *Sports Illustrated*, 14 February 2005, [si.com/vault/2005/02/14/8251860/making-the-right-calls](http://si.com/vault/2005/02/14/8251860/making-the-right-calls).
5. Quoted in Albert Bigelow Paine, *Mark Twain: A Biography: The Personal and Literary Life of Samuel Langhorne Clemens*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), 1334.
6. Ezra Taft Benson, “Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989.
7. David O. McKay, “Life at Its Best,” *Instructor* 88, no. 2 (February 1953): 47.
8. Joseph Smith, “History, Circa Summer 1832,” 3, [josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832?p=3](http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-circa-summer-1832?p=3); in Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *JSP*, 13.
9. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Tongue of Angels,” *Ensign*, May 2007.
10. See Levin Faust, “Discouragement,” in *Plain Truths About the Industrial Problems* (Rockford, Illinois: Mechanics’ Machine Company, 1919), 43–44.