

The Blessing of Commandments

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My dear brothers and sisters, during the first three years of my service as President of Brigham Young University I have given several talks outlining the opportunities and responsibilities of students at this institution. The most recent, “Challenges for the Year Ahead,” which was given a year ago, has been printed and mailed to each of you. I urge all students to familiarize themselves with the content of that message. It contains many important things that I will not repeat here. I hold the view that when important information is written down and made available to adults it is not necessary to repeat it again and again to make them responsible for the contents. For that reason this will not be a President’s message of concern primarily to students. Instead, I will speak about matters that pertain to members of the Church generally. My devotional message concerns attitudes, and my objective is to encourage you to look upon the commandments of God as a blessing and to look upon your own talents as something you have a duty to magnify by every effort at your disposal.

Commandments Make Weak Men Strong

The Lord said this about the persons who would build up the land of Zion:

Blessed are they whose feet stand upon the land of Zion, who have obeyed my gospel; for they shall receive for their reward the good things of the earth, and it shall bring forth in its strength.

And they shall also be crowned with blessings from above, yea, and with commandments not a few, and with revelations in their time. [D&C 59:3–4]

In the Lord’s preface to the Book of Commandments, which is now called the Doctrine and Covenants, we find the Lord saying this:

These commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to an understanding.

And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known;

And inasmuch as they sought wisdom they might be instructed;

And inasmuch as they sinned they might be chastened, that they might repent;

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And inasmuch as they were humble they might be made strong, and blessed from on high, and receive knowledge from time to time. [D&C 1:24–28]

Elsewhere in the Doctrine and Covenants we read that the Lord sent forth his gospel and gave his commandments “to prepare the weak for those things which are coming on the earth” that men “might be made partakers of the glories which were to be revealed” (D&C 133:57–58).

Commandments are a blessing, my brothers and sisters, because our Father in heaven has given them to us in order to help us grow and develop the qualities we must have if we are to obtain eternal life and dwell with him. By keeping his commandments, we qualify for his blessings. “There is a law,” we are told, “irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–21). Until I read that passage again in the Doctrine and Covenants in preparation for this talk, I had not realized how that principle was juxtaposed to some important instruction about learning. Read those verses in the 130th section of the Doctrine and Covenants and then notice the two verses immediately preceding them:

Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.

And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. [D&C 130:18–19]

The next verse is “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven . . . , upon which all blessings are predicated.” I see a real relationship between that principle and the activity of learning in which we are engaged—in which

all of our Heavenly Father’s children are or should be engaged.

Now, for purposes of illustration, I will review various commandments and comment on the blessings of obedience or the consequences of disobedience.

The Law of Chastity

First, chastity. Time after time, the scriptures teach us that no unclean thing can enter the kingdom of God or dwell in his presence (see Moses 6:57; 1 Nephi 10:21, 15:34). We are warned against sexual sin because it is among the gravest of sins, which will forever separate us from God—subject only to prolonged and painful repentance—and which will in any case cause an immediate withdrawal of the guiding Spirit of the Lord. As Paul taught in his first letter to the Corinthians, if any man defile the temple of God, which is our body, the spirit of God will withdraw from him (see 1 Corinthians 3:17).

Similarly, the prophet Helaman described the sorry state of the Nephites who had been brought low by their unbelief and wickedness: “The Spirit of the Lord,” he said, “did no more preserve them; yea, it had withdrawn from them because the Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples—Therefore, the Lord did cease to preserve them” (Helaman 4:24–25).

The Law of the Sabbath

Consider the blessings associated with the law of the Sabbath. “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8) was the commandment the Lord gave to the children of Israel for “a perpetual covenant”—a sign, he said, “between me and the children of Israel forever” (Exodus 31:16–17). When the Savior came, he rejected most of the technicalities that talmudic scholars had built around Sabbath observance, but he reaffirmed the sacredness of the Sabbath and taught that it was lawful to do well on the Sabbath (see Matthew 12:12) and that the Sabbath was made for man (see Mark

2:27). In our own day the Lord has taught us through prophets that we should rest from our labors go to the house of prayer and offer up our sacraments, and pay our devotions unto the Most High “that thou mayest more fully keep thyself unspotted from the world” and “that thy joy may be full” (see D&C 59:9–13).

People who use the Sabbath day as a time of shopping, fishing, boating, or other recreational or business activities deprive themselves of the blessings of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a blessing to man as a time of spiritual growth and refreshment. As Brigham Young taught, the laws of the Sabbath were given for the benefit of man—“not,” he said, “imposed upon him as by a task-master, in the form of a rigid discipline; but they are bestowed upon him as a blessing, a favour, and a mercy, for his express benefit” (*Journal of Discourses*, 6:278). Persons who fail to keep the Sabbath lose an opportunity for spiritual growth and forfeit the rich companionship of the Spirit of the Lord.

I had a personal experience that taught me for all time the importance of observing the Sabbath. As a Brigham Young University student, married with two small children to support, I had a job that required me to work on the Sabbath. Consequently, I did not enjoy the blessings of the Sabbath in full measure, despite my efforts always to attend at least one of my Sabbath meetings. When I left this campus to study at the University of Chicago, my mother reminded me that my father had never studied on the Sabbath during his professional training. She said to me very casually, “Son, if you want to enjoy that blessing you should arrange your activities so that you never study, so that you never do anything on the Sabbath except partake of the spiritual food that is available to you on the Lord’s day.”

I made up my mind at that time that I would observe the Sabbath faithfully so that I could qualify for the blessings of spiritual growth and the companionship of the Spirit that come

from observing faithfully the Sabbath of our Lord. I testify to you that I realized those blessings in measurable ways on innumerable occasions. My concern for the Sabbath is to earn the blessings available to those who observe it, not to keep myself from sinning. My attitude is to look on the commandment of the Sabbath as a gift of my Heavenly Father to teach me what I should do if I want to enjoy his richest blessings. That is the attitude I encourage each of us to develop toward each of our Father in heaven’s commandments.

We read this in Isaiah about the Sabbath, and I affirm to you its truth:

If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable; and shalt honor him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words:

Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.
[Isaiah 58:13–14]

The Law of Tithing

Some commandments are given with an express promise. Tithing comes with a promise of material blessings:

Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.

And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field. . . .

And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightful land, saith the Lord of hosts.
[Malachi 3:10–12]

Tithing also has its spiritual blessings, preparing us for celestial glory. In his sixth lecture on faith, the Prophet Joseph Smith spoke these words, which to me are memorable. They can be applied, not only to whatever small sacrifice we might make in paying our tithing, but also to every sacrifice we are called upon to make in keeping the commandments of God. "Let us here observe," the Prophet Joseph Smith said,

that a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things, never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation; for from the first existence of man, the faith necessary unto the enjoyment of life and salvation never could be obtained without the sacrifice of all earthly things.

...

Those, then, who make the sacrifice, will have the testimony that their course is pleasing in the sight of God; and those who have this testimony will have faith to lay hold on eternal life, and will be enabled, through faith, to endure unto the end, and receive the crown that is laid up for them that love the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. [Joseph Smith, Lectures on Faith, pp. 60–61]

Laws of Health

There are other commandments that give reasons or promised blessings. Here is one that applies particularly to each of us, I suppose: "Retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early [perhaps the more difficult part of that counsel], that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated" (D&C 88:124.) Now, I submit that those who are interested in having vigorous bodies and minds need to have a special concern with that commandment.

Here is another that is a great favorite of mine. We all know what we are taught in the Word of Wisdom, section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants. We covenant to abstain from alcohol, tobacco, tea, and coffee. Why? The Lord tells us. He gives us a promise:

All saints who remember to keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience to the commandments, shall receive health in their navel and marrow to their bones;

And shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures;

And shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint.

And I, the Lord, give unto them a promise, that the destroying angel shall pass by them, as the children of Israel, and not slay them. [D&C 89:18–21]

During the past two weeks we have seen evidence in the daily press of the destroying angel passing by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in statistically measurable degree with respect to their death rate from all kinds of cancer. There is a phenomenal difference between the death rate of the members of this Church and other people generally. But more important even than the physical blessings of the Word of Wisdom in this community of learning are the spiritual blessings. When the Lord promises us that we will find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures, I suggest to you that one thing referred to is the office and mission of the Holy Ghost to teach us, to guide us into all truth, and to bring all things to our recollection (see John 14:26, 16:13). Those are the promises of the Spirit, and I suggest to you that those who break the Word of Wisdom forfeit the companionship of that Spirit and lose the blessings of being led to find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge by the companionship of that Spirit, blessings available to us if we live worthily, including faithful observance of the Word of Wisdom.

We should rejoice in the commandments of God and recognize them as valuable gifts from a loving Father to his children. "For what doth it profit a man if a gift is bestowed upon him, and he receive not the gift? Behold, he rejoices not in that which is given unto him, neither

rejoices in him who is the giver of the gift” (D&C 88:33).

The Process of True Repentance

We are taught by the commandments of God how we can cleanse ourselves from sin. The various steps of repentance include recognition of the wrong, resolve to do right, and restitution. These steps prepare us for the spiritual growth necessary to overcome the effects of sin and to rise above it.

I recall a young man who did not understand repentance. A member of this Church, although not an active member and never faithful in the observance of his covenants even from his youth, this young man was in jail in Chicago. As a member of the stake presidency, I received a letter from loving parents in the West who said, “Would you visit our son?” I got to jail and found him there, charged with the murder of his six-month-old baby. The child had been crying, and this fellow, who had not learned how to control his emotions, had seized the baby in a fit of anger and struck it in the face with his fist, breaking some of the bones in the head, severing the spinal column, and causing almost instant death. He was charged with murder. I had the responsibility of talking with him and giving him such comfort as I could give. I tried to prepare him for what I considered to be his inevitable sentence to the penitentiary—as, indeed, turned out to be the case. I said to him, “You have got to prepare yourself to go to the penitentiary. You have killed a human being.”

He said, “I didn’t mean to and I am sorry. Why must I be punished?” This was his consistent attitude during the entire period of our interview. He could see no reason why he should be punished because he felt that, once he said he was sorry, no further act of contrition, no suffering, no repentance on his part was necessary. At variance with external law, that attitude, until it is changed, will prevent that young man from entering upon the long

and difficult road of repentance. That attitude will embitter his soul as he endures the punishment necessary for one who has taken the life of a human being.

In contrast, consider the attitude of the students who write me about violations of the Code of Honor. About once a month or more frequently, I receive a letter from a student confessing that he or she has plagiarized or cheated on work at Brigham Young University. Some of these letters are from the mission field or from young men or women who are or are soon to be called upon missions. They say, “I have something on my conscience that I wish to clear. In Course 100 I cheated, or I plagiarized a paper. Here is the information. I am ready to take my punishment, a reduction in grade or a loss of credit, whatever it is. But I wish to get on the path of growth.” And with love and understanding, rejoicing that someone has turned a corner on a dishonest, sinful, and degrading act, we consult with the teachers involved and assist these students in a spirit of mercy and justice, as best we are able.

The Family

We are taught by the gospel about the supreme importance of the family. Why is the family so important? It is because the most important position we hold in this life is our position as husband or wife, father or mother, and family member. When these relationships are sealed by the power of the holy priesthood, they are assured for all eternity. In every position other than the family that we hold in this life—my position, your position, Church positions, civic, employment, and government positions—we are subject to being released by duly constituted authority in this life; or, if it is a position we hold for life, the Lord can release us by arresting a heartbeat. Only family positions are of eternal duration, provided of course they are sealed by proper authority and confirmed by worthy adherence to covenants.

Challenges Coming from the Lord's Servants

So much for commandments. What about the things we are asked to do by the servants of the Lord? A favorite example of mine is the march of Zion's Camp. The ostensible purpose of this march was to move five hundred men from Ohio to give military relief to the persecuted Saints in Missouri. The real purpose and effect of the march were to develop faith and give leadership training and experience to the men who were in Zion's Camp. These were the individuals who would be called to lead the kingdom. Zion's Camp included all twelve men who were later called to the first Quorum of the Twelve, including some who were to become Presidents of the Church.

Winston Churchill spoke of the sharp agate points upon which the ponderous balance of destiny turns. Every one of us has in our own lives those sharp agate points upon which the ponderous balance of our destinies turn. Thirteen years ago, my stake president, John K. Edmunds, called me to meet him for lunch in a downtown Chicago restaurant. (We were both practicing law in that city at the time.) I was then a counselor in the Sunday School superintendency of one of the wards in his stake. He called me to a stake mission and to serve as a counselor in the stake mission presidency. At that time, I was working all day and every evening of the week and all day Saturday—excluding Sunday, as has always been my practice. I was working morning, noon, and night six days a week on some very taxing assignments for the law firm that employed me. He called me on a stake mission and told me—as was his wont, perfectly unyielding, without any compromise—that I would be expected to give forty hours of proselyting time per month in addition to attending meetings, bringing investigators to church, and doing the gospel study I would need to qualify myself as a stake missionary. I said to myself at that time that this was a turning point in my life; this was a test of my faith. Would I have the faith

necessary to accept that position in view of the requirements of my employment? Even at that time, but more surely as I have looked back on it, I could recognize this as one of those sharp agate points that Churchill identified. Fortunately for me I mustered the faith, accepted the call, and said to my president, "If the Lord wants me to serve in that position—and I do honor the calling as coming from the Lord through his servant—he will make it possible for me to do it. When do you want me to start?"

He said, "I have an appointment I'd like you to keep tonight."

I got my affairs in order and began that evening. Effective with that calling to a stake mission, I rarely ever worked after five o'clock again in the remaining course of my law practice, and still I realized greater success than I had ever realized by any measure that a young man could choose for success in his chosen profession. The Lord made it up to me in countless ways that I have no time and indeed no ability to particularize for you, but I can simply tell you that my faith was rewarded in every possible way.

More important to me, as I look back, is the certainty with which I can see that this calling to a stake mission changed the direction of my life and set me on a course that brought me here in measurable, deliberate, and direct steps to stand before you today. As I began to do the work of that missionary calling, I began to reevaluate the course on which I had set myself professionally, and I began to think about whether I wanted to spend the rest of my life in that particular law practice. Six months later, when I received a renewed offer of a position in law teaching, I accepted it. I would never have accepted that position if it had not been for my calling to a stake mission. That calling also offered me an opportunity to grow in faith and devotion and loyalty to the leadership of the Church. In every way I can measure it was a turning point in my life.

We have these sharp agate points. They may turn us for the better; they may turn us for the worse. The only thing you can be sure of is that, if you do what is right and make your decision prayerfully, you will make the right decision and will be able to look back on it and say, “That was a good decision in terms of the eternal course I pursue.”

Robert Frost said it this way:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*
[“The Road Not Taken,” st. 4]

Accomplishment Through Personal Effort

Accomplishment is pleasing to the Lord. He said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). The receipt of a Nobel Prize by a member of this faculty or a member of this student body would, I am sure, reflect great credit upon the University and the Church. Professor Kenneth R. Hardy of our faculty recently published an article in *Science Magazine* in which he pointed out that in several recent decades Utah was the most productive of all states in the Union in the number of doctoral-level persons produced. This state was the most productive of all fifty states by a wide margin. He attributed this statistic to a set of cultural values that promote scholarly and scientific activity. These values—including belief in a world governed by law, the dignity of man, personal dedication, democratic and equalitarian ideals—are clearly, he said, attributable to Mormon values (“Social Origin of American Scientist and Scholars,” *Science Magazine*, vol. 185, no. 4150 [9 August 1974]: 497–506). That is another blessing you enjoy by your membership in the Church and your faithful observance of the principles of the gospel.

Consider the parable of the talents in connection with the use of your own abilities and

potential. You remember that the Master gave different talents to each of his servants, but he held them accountable for the use of what he had given them. The parable illustrates the point by the gift of worldly things, but I think the principle applies to the use of our personal talents not only in worldly but also in what we call spiritual things.

What proportion of your talents or potential do you use, my brothers and sisters? Do you fool yourself? You may fool yourself and one another, but you will not fool your Heavenly Father. He knows whether he gave you five talents or two talents or one talent. What proportion of your potential do you use? Are you satisfied with less than your best at anything you do? Indeed, do you ever do your best? Are you pushed by someone else? Do you push yourself to do your best? What separates people is, not so much intelligence or breaks, but determination—the proportion of their ability that they are determined to use.

The Lord taught us to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). The Lord has given us faith, and he expects us to cultivate it and use it. He has also given us talents, including the power to reason. He expects us to cultivate and educate those powers in seeking learning by study. There is no better confirmation than the example of the Prophet Joseph founding the School of the Prophets, struggling to learn Hebrew, striving to learn something about law, teaching his people under the inspiration of the Lord to study astronomy, geology, history, government, and every useful science and art. Despite the fact that he enjoyed direct communication with our Heavenly Father, the Prophet Joseph was out grubbing to learn all that he could by the worldly means at his disposal. How could any of us be justified in doing less? The Lord will bless us, but his blessings just follow our efforts. They rarely precede them.

One of the favorite sayings I brought from a classroom at Brigham Young University was

a statement by Knute Rockne. (You remember him, the famous football coach at Notre Dame.) He said, "Prayers work best when players are big." Now, I offer that to you, not in a spirit of skepticism, but as an illustration of the proper balance of works and faith. The Lord's blessings normally don't come until we have expended every effort we can. Only when we have done all that we can does the Lord put us over the line.

Recall the rebuke that the Lord gave Oliver Cowdery when he was unable to translate: "You have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. . . . You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right" (D&C 9:7-8).

My brothers and sisters, we belong to a community of workers and doers, not to a community of dreamers or ascetics piously and passively waiting for the Millennium. We are working to bring it to pass. The Lord's blessings, including inspiration for direction and guidance, come to his children who are on the move. The Liahona came to Lehi and his children after years in the desert, not when they were in or just outside Jerusalem. The word of the Lord on the organization of the camp of Israel didn't come in Nauvoo. It came on the west bank of the Missouri near Omaha, almost a year after the Saints had left Nauvoo.

One of my favorite illustrations of this principle is the practical spirit of the founder of this University, Brigham Young, concerning the Martin and Willie handcart companies. (My wife's great-grandmother, Margetta Clark, who became the wife of Anson Call, was in that Martin handcart company.) Brigham Young stood up in conference on Sunday, October 5, 1856, and announced that these two handcart companies were in distress in Wyoming, six or seven hundred miles from Salt Lake City. He said that the text for those who spoke in that session of conference would be "to get them here!"

This is the salvation I am now seeking for, to save our brethren that would be apt to perish, or suffer extremely, if we do not send them assistance.

I shall call upon the Bishops this day [the Sabbath], I shall not wait until to-morrow, nor until next day, for sixty good mule teams and twelve or fifteen wagons . . . twelve tons of flour and forty good teamsters. . . .

I will tell you that all your faith, religion, and profession of religion, will never save one soul of you in the celestial kingdom of our God, unless you carry out just such principles as I am now teaching you. Go and bring in those people now on the Plains, and attend strictly to those things which we call temporal, or temporal duties, otherwise your faith will be in vain; the preaching you have heard will be in vain to you and you will sink to hell, unless you attend to the things we tell you. [Journal of Discourses, 4:113]

You'd know that was Brigham Young if I hadn't told you.

Now, my brothers and sisters, we have men and women all over this campus who are working, who are applying the principles of which I have spoken, who recognize the gospel as a blessing, who recognize work as a privilege, and who recognize challenge as an opportunity. We have people whose efforts are going to bring about a hastening of the day of our Lord. We have people who are working on the technology to spread the gospel message. We have people who are working on programs to teach people how to read and people who are working on how to translate languages by computers. These are faithful workers, and the Lord will bless them and inspire them, but those blessings and that inspiration will come to them as they study their work in their own minds and set about applying the best learning at their disposal.

And how about you, my fellow students? Sitting here are future government leaders, General Authorities, leaders of business, world-famous musicians and artists, and mothers

and fathers of these and thousands more. You will receive blessings to use the skills you have obtained, but the Lord expects you to prepare yourself to be used by him. He will crown your efforts with blessings. He will not initiate the effort. If you would be an instrument in the hands of the Lord, put forth the effort to make yourself an instrument that is shiny and sharp. We are recipients of the blessings of commandments and of a philosophy that teaches us to aspire to the gods and promises us help in attaining our aspirations. Let us be off with renewed determination along the upward path of growth.

In the revelation from the Lord that speaks of blessing us with commandments not a few, the Lord gives us commandments to love our neighbor, to keep the Sabbath, and do much more. He tells us to do these things with thanksgiving, with a glad heart and a cheerful countenance. Then he says, "He who doeth the works of righteousness shall receive his reward, even peace in this world, and eternal life in the world to come" (D&C 59:23). May that be our happy lot I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.