



## THE DEDICATION OF A LIFETIME

### Elder Dallin H. Oaks

Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

CES Fireside for Young Adults • May 1, 2005 • Oakland, California

My brothers and sisters, I am grateful to the choir for that stirring and inspiring music, and I thank President Steven Edgren for that introduction.

I am pleased to be here in Oakland. To those of you who are here and to those of you who are in other locations, I say thanks for your presence.

I am glad to speak to this audience of 18- to 30-year-old young adults. Our youngest daughter is in this age bracket. So are 15 of our 28 grandchildren. So I have a special interest in 18- to 30-year-olds.

#### Live the Gospel Day by Day

In speaking to you, I am speaking to the future. You are the future leaders of business; of education; of science; of cities, states, and nations; and of the Church. Even more important, you are the future leaders of the families of the Church.

In preparation for this evening, I studied a talk given at a recent CES fireside for young adults. The date was Sunday, February 6, and the setting was the Marriott Center at BYU. The speaker was Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve. For me, studying his talk was both edifying and poignant.

You will remember that Elder Nelson asked you “to think about yourself, not as you are, but as you may become—50 years from now.” He asked, “What do you want *to be* 50 years from now?” He then gave a great message on “Faith and Families.” He told about his own life and that of his dear companion, Dantzel. He talked about their long struggle to get an education. He talked about the choices they had made in their married life, seeking first the kingdom of God. Faith, he said, had been “the lodestar for [their] married life.” He recalled the fact that he had not sent a bill for surgical services until he had been out of medical school for more than 12 years. By then they had five children. You can imagine the faith they exercised and the sacrifices they made to go forward with their family as Dr. Nelson completed his long period of professional preparation. (See *Faith and Families* [CES fireside for young adults, Feb. 6, 2005], 1–2.)

If you heard Elder Nelson’s great message at April conference, you know why it was a poignant experience for me to read his CES talk given last February 6. In that talk he paid a wonderful and deserved tribute to his dear companion, and just six days later she died suddenly. Truly, as Elder Nelson taught us, life has some unexpected surprises, and it is well for each of us not only to look ahead to what we want to be in 50 years but also to live day by day so that we are always ready if we are suddenly summoned home.

#### “See That Ye Do Them”

Last week I was talking with a member of the Quorum of the Twelve about comments we had received on our April conference talks. My friend said someone told him, “I surely enjoyed your talk.” We agreed that this is not the kind of comment we like to receive. As my friend said, “I didn’t give that talk to be *enjoyed*. What does he think I am, some kind of entertainer?” Another member of our quorum joined the conversation by saying, “That reminds me of the story of a good minister. When a parishioner said, ‘I surely enjoyed your sermon today,’ the minister replied, ‘In that case, you didn’t understand it.’ ”

You may remember that this April conference I spoke on pornography. No one told me they “enjoyed” that talk—not one! In fact, there was nothing enjoyable in it even for me.

I speak of these recent conversations to teach the principle that a message given by a General Authority at a general conference—a message prepared under the influence of the Spirit to further the work of the Lord—is not given to be enjoyed. It is given to inspire, to edify, to challenge, or to correct. It is given to be heard under the influence of the Spirit of the Lord, with the intended result that the listener learns from the talk and from the Spirit what he or she should *do* about it.

King Benjamin understood that principle and explained it. His great sermon that is recorded in the first few chapters of the book of Mosiah begins with these words:

“My brethren, all ye that have assembled yourselves together, you that can hear my words which I shall speak unto you this day; . . . I have not commanded you to come up hither to trifle with the words which I shall speak, but that you should hearken unto me, and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand” (Mosiah 2:9).

As this prophet-king taught, when we come to hear a servant of the Lord, we are not “to trifle with the words” that he speaks. It is our duty to open our ears to hear and our hearts to understand. And what we should seek to understand is what we should *do* about the message. I feel sure that is what King Benjamin meant, because he said later in his great message, “And now, if you believe all these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:10). Please remember that principle as I speak to you on this Sabbath day.

### “Tranquil and Steady Dedication of a Lifetime”

I have titled my talk “The Dedication of a Lifetime.” I borrowed this title from something said by Governor Adlai E. Stevenson of Illinois, who was the Democratic Party candidate for president of the United States in 1952 and 1956. He was a fine man and would have been president if he had not been running against a very popular opponent, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

In speaking to an American Legion Convention, Stevenson gave a wise statement about patriotism. He said that what we need “is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime” (speech given Aug. 27, 1952, quoted in John Bartlett, comp., *Familiar Quotations*, 13th ed. [1955], 986). I like that—“not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.” I will use this description of patriotism as a formula for how we should live the gospel.

Some people live the gospel with “short, frenzied outbursts of emotion,” followed by long periods of lapse or by performance that is intermittent or sputtering. What we need in living the gospel is “the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.”

So what does it mean to obey the commandments, to keep our covenants, and to serve the Lord with “the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime”? It means to be a 100 percent Latter-day Saint, 100 percent of the time. In scriptural terms, it means to follow the direction King Benjamin gave to his people: “I would

that ye should be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works, that Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent, may seal you his” (Mosiah 5:15). It means to follow the plea Father Lehi gave to a wavering son: “O that thou mightest be like unto this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable in keeping the commandments of the Lord!” (1 Nephi 2:10).

The “dedication of a lifetime” requires one to be tranquil and steady, steadfast and immovable. We hold fast to our covenants and to the leadership and teachings of the servants of the Lord so that we will, as the Apostle Paul wrote, “be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14). That is our standard and our goal. This steadfast standard requires us to avoid extremes. Our performance should be the steady 100 percent of a committed servant, not the frenzied and occasional 120 percent of the fanatic.

A valued teacher I had at BYU many years ago gave this definition of a fanatic: “A fanatic is one who has lost sight of his goal but redoubled his efforts to get there.” That definition has been a good guide to me throughout my life, and I commend it to you. Don’t seek to prove your dedication by fanatical excesses or by other evidence of “holier than thou.” We pay our tithing, but we remember that tithing is a steady 10 percent—not 8 percent and especially not intermittent or frenzied outbursts of 12 percent.

This reminds me of the concerns President Harold B. Lee expressed to me when I was president of BYU. Shortly before the Provo Temple was dedicated, he told me he was concerned that this nearby temple would cause some BYU students to attend the temple so often that they would neglect their studies. He urged me to work with the BYU stake presidents to make sure that the students understood that even something as sacred and important as temple service needed to be done in wisdom and order so that the students would not neglect the studies that should be their major focus during their student years at BYU.

### Dangers of Carrying Good Principles to Excess

Over a decade ago I gave a talk called “Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall” (*Ensign*, Oct. 1994, 11–19). I talked about what happens when we take a good principle or commandment and apply it to excess. I gave 20 examples. I have adapted 5 of these to my current plea that we practice the tranquil and steady

dedication of a lifetime rather than what Governor Stevenson called “short, frenzied outbursts of emotion.”

Appropriately enough, my first example concerns patriotism. Even love of country, if carried to excess, can harm us spiritually. There are some citizens whose patriotism (as they define it) is so frenzied and all-consuming that it seems to override every other responsibility, including family and church. For example, we hear of some patriots (so called) who are participating in or provisioning private armies and making private preparations for armed conflict. Their excessive zeal for one aspect of patriotism is injuring them spiritually as they withdraw from the society of the Church and separate themselves from the governance of civil authorities to whom our twelfth article of faith makes all of us subject.

My second example concerns persons who have an all-encompassing commitment to one particular doctrine or commandment of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This could be an extraordinary focus on family history work, an unusually intense preoccupation with constitutional government, or some other exclusive occupation.

In a memorable message given at the 1971 October conference, Elder Boyd K. Packer likened the fulness of the gospel to a piano keyboard. He reminded us that a person could be “attracted by a single key,” such as a doctrine they want to hear “played over and over again.” He explained:

“Some members of the Church who should know better pick out a hobby key or two and tap them incessantly. . . . They lose track that there is a fulness of the gospel, . . . [which they reject] in preference to a favorite note. This becomes exaggerated and distorted, leading them away into apostasy” (*Teach Ye Diligently* [1975], 44).

We could say of such persons, as the Lord said of the members of the Shaker sect, “that they desire to know the truth in part, but not all” (D&C 49:2). And so, I say, beware of the hobby key. If you tap one key to the exclusion or serious detriment of the full harmony of the gospel keyboard, you are deviating from the recommended tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.

In the midst of these examples of the danger of good principles carried to excess, I must confess one of my own deficiencies. You have heard the old adage “Be not the first by which the new is tried, nor yet the last to lay the old aside.” When it comes to the technological

marvels of this generation, like the computer, I suppose I am the last to lay the old aside.

I still use a manual typewriter. For over 50 years I have written letters and memoranda and composed part of my talks on a succession of manual typewriters. A few years ago the latest of these, my trusty old portable manual typewriter, finally wore out. I began to look for a replacement. It was not easy to find.

The generation of technology that followed the manual typewriter was the electric typewriter. I skipped right over that generation. Next came word-processing equipment and computers with increasing levels of sophistication, like my capable secretary, Margie McKnight, used to produce the numerous drafts of this talk. Computers are what stores sell today, so I shouldn’t have been surprised when young salesmen gave me blank stares when I asked for a portable manual typewriter. One imaginative fellow proudly produced an electric typewriter small and light enough to be carried from one electric outlet to another, and asked if that was what I wanted.

Finally, I found a small shop with a grizzled old proprietor who knew what a portable manual typewriter was. He still had one in the back room, and I was thrilled to purchase it. The proprietor was a little puzzled about what I was going to do with it. He was too polite to ask but made a guess. As he handed me my new portable typewriter, he said, “We don’t sell many of these. You must do a lot of camping.” True story!

I continue with a third example of the contrast between steady dedication and short, frenzied outbursts of emotion. A willingness to sacrifice all we possess in the work of the Lord is surely a mark of dedication. In fact, it is a covenant we make in sacred places. But this must be carefully confined to those sacrifices the Lord and His leaders have asked of us at this time. We should say with Alma, “Why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?” (Alma 29:6). Persons who consider it insufficient to pay their tithes and offerings and to work in the positions to which they have been called can easily be led astray by cultist groups offering what I will call “frenzied outlets” for their willingness to sacrifice.

A fourth example concerns goals. There is great strength in being focused on our goals. We have all seen the good fruits of that focus. Yet an intense focus on goals can cause a person to forget the importance of righteous *means*. When that happens, a commendable

steady dedication can be transformed into a dangerous frenzy of excess.

A fifth area in which we must pursue the steady course and avoid frenzied excess concerns finances. We are commanded to give to the poor. Could the fulfillment of that fundamental Christian obligation be carried to excess? Yes, it can. I have seen it. Perhaps you have also seen persons who fulfilled the duty to give to the poor to such an excess that they impoverished their own families by expending resources of property or time that were needed for family members.

To use an old agricultural expression, we should not eat our seed corn. Such an excess would deprive us of the ability to plant and harvest next year's crop from which to support our families and give to the poor. King Benjamin, who commanded his people to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and administer to their relief (see Mosiah 4:26), also cautioned them to "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" (v. 27; see also D&C 10:4).

As I conclude my five examples, I need to issue a caution. The principle I have espoused, that we should pursue steady dedication and avoid frenzied excesses, could be understood as implying that we should have "moderation in all things." Not so. The Savior has commanded us to serve with all our "heart, might, mind and strength" (D&C 4:2), to "seek . . . earnestly the riches of eternity" (D&C 68:31), and to be "valiant in the testimony of Jesus" (D&C 76:79). He has also told us that if we are lukewarm, He will spue us out of His mouth (see Revelation 3:16). The thrust of my examples is that we should be steadfast and consistent in our dedication, our commitment, and our efforts.

### Dating versus Hanging Out

I have tried to give examples of the importance of a lifetime of steadfast dedication, and I have warned against the dangers of carrying good principles to excess. If I have not yet succeeded in challenging you to look to your own behavior, perhaps my last subject will do so.

In his address at the BYU commencement exercise two weeks ago, Elder Earl C. Tingey referred to an article in a recent issue of *Time* magazine about young people your age. It states that the years from 18 to 25 have become "a distinct and separate life stage, a strange, transitional never-never land between adolescence and adulthood in

which people stall for a few extra years, [postponing] . . . adult responsibility" (Lev Grossman, "Grow Up? Not So Fast," *Time*, Jan. 24, 2005, 44). The article describes these transitional individuals as "permanent adolescents, . . . twentysomething Peter Pans" (p. 42). Putting this analysis in terms more familiar to his audience of BYU graduates and their families, Elder Tingey spoke of "the indecision some college graduates have in . . . accepting the responsibilities of marriage and family" (address at commencement, Apr. 21, 2005).

This tendency to postpone adult responsibilities, including marriage and family, is surely visible among our LDS young adults. The average age at marriage has increased in the last few decades, and the number of children born to LDS married couples has decreased. Elder Nelson's fireside message three months ago, *Faith and Families*, spoke of this subject, and it is also part of my theme, "The Dedication of a Lifetime." I will, therefore, conclude by sharing some concerns about some current practices in the relationships of young LDS singles in North America.

Knowledgeable observers report that dating has nearly disappeared from college campuses and among young adults generally. It has been replaced by something called "hanging out" (see Bruce A. Chadwick, "Hanging Out, Hooking Up, and Celestial Marriage," in *Brigham Young University 2002–2003 Speeches* [2003], 1–8). You apparently know what this is, but I will describe it for the benefit of those of us who are middle-aged or older and otherwise uninformed. Hanging out consists of numbers of young men and numbers of young women joining together in some group activity. It is very different from dating.

For the benefit of some of you who are not middle-aged or older, I also may need to describe what dating is. Unlike hanging out, dating is not a team sport. Dating is pairing off to experience the kind of one-on-one association and temporary commitment that can lead to marriage, in some rare and treasured cases.

What has made dating an endangered species? I am not sure, but I can see some contributing factors:

1. The cultural tides in our world run strongly against commitments in family relationships. For example, divorce has been made legally easy, and childbearing has become unpopular. These pressures against commitments obviously serve the devil's opposition to the Father's plan for His children. That plan relies on covenants or commitments kept. Whatever

draws us away from commitments weakens our capacity to participate in the plan. Dating involves commitments, if only for a few hours. Hanging out requires no commitments, at least not for the men if the women provide the food and shelter.

2. The leveling effect of the women's movement has contributed to discourage dating. As women's options have increased and some have become more aggressive, some men have become reluctant to take traditional male initiatives, such as asking for dates, lest they be thought to qualify for the dreaded label "male chauvinist."
3. Hanging out is glamorized on TV programs about singles.
4. The meaning and significance of a "date" has also changed in such a way as to price dating out of the market. I saw this trend beginning among our younger children. For whatever reason, high school boys felt they had to do something elaborate or bizarre to ask for a date, especially for an event like a prom, and girls felt they had to do likewise to accept. In addition, a date had to be something of an expensive production. I saw some of this on the BYU campus during the '70s. I remember seeing one couple having a dinner catered by friends on the median strip between lanes of traffic just south of the BYU football stadium.

All of this made dating more difficult. And the more elaborate and expensive the date, the fewer the dates. As dates become fewer and more elaborate, this seems to create an expectation that a date implies seriousness or continuing commitment. That expectation discourages dating even more. Gone is the clumsy and inexpensive phone call your parents and grandparents and I used to make. That call went something like this: "What're ya doin' tonight? How about a movie?" Or, "How about taking a walk downtown?" Cheap dates like that can be frequent and nonthreatening, since they don't seem to imply a continuing commitment.

Simple and more frequent dates allow both men and women to "shop around" in a way that allows extensive evaluation of the prospects. The old-fashioned date was a wonderful way to get acquainted with a member of the opposite sex. It encouraged conversation. It allowed you to see how you treat others and how you are treated in a one-on-one situation. It gave opportunities to learn how to initiate and sustain a mature relationship. None of that happens in hanging out.

My single brothers and sisters, follow the simple dating pattern and you don't need to do your shopping on the Internet through chat rooms or dating services—two alternatives that can be very dangerous or at least unnecessary or ineffective.

There is another possible contributing factor to the demise of dating and the prominence of the culture of hanging out. For many years the Church has counseled young people not to date before age 16. Perhaps some young adults, especially men, have carried that wise counsel to excess and determined not to date before 26 or maybe even 36.

Men, if you have returned from your mission and you are still following the boy-girl patterns you were counseled to follow when you were 15, it is time for you to grow up. Gather your courage and look for someone to pair off with. Start with a variety of dates with a variety of young women, and when that phase yields a good prospect, proceed to courtship. It's marriage time. That is what the Lord intends for His young adult sons and daughters. Men have the initiative, and you men should get on with it. If you don't know what a date is, perhaps this definition will help. I heard it from my 18-year-old granddaughter. A "date" must pass the test of three *p*'s: (1) planned ahead, (2) paid for, and (3) paired off.

Young women, resist too much hanging out, and encourage dates that are simple, inexpensive, and frequent. Don't make it easy for young men to hang out in a setting where you women provide the food. Don't subsidize freeloaders. An occasional group activity is okay, but when you see men who make hanging out their primary interaction with the opposite sex, I think you should lock the pantry and bolt the front door.

If you do this, you should also hang out a sign, "Will open for individual dates," or something like that. And, young women, please make it easier for these shy males to ask for a simple, inexpensive date. Part of making it easier is to avoid implying that a date is something very serious. If we are to persuade young men to ask for dates more frequently, we must establish a mutual expectation that to go on a date is not to imply a continuing commitment. Finally, young women, if you turn down a date, be kind. Otherwise you may crush a nervous and shy questioner and destroy him as a potential dater, and that could hurt some other sister.

My single young friends, we counsel you to channel your associations with the opposite sex into dating patterns that have the potential to mature into

marriage, not hanging-out patterns that only have the prospect to mature into team sports like touch football. Marriage is not a group activity—at least not until the children come along in goodly numbers.

Sisters, you seem to have enjoyed my primary concentration on the responsibilities of single men. Now I have a few words for single women.

If you are just marking time waiting for a marriage prospect, stop waiting. You may never have the opportunity for a suitable marriage in this life, so stop waiting and start moving. Prepare yourself for life—even a single life—by education, experience, and planning. Don't wait for happiness to be thrust upon you. Seek it out in service and learning. Make a life for yourself. And trust in the Lord. Your dedication of a lifetime should follow King Benjamin's advice to be "calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come" (Mosiah 4:11).

### **"They Govern Themselves"**

Now, single sisters, I have an expert witness to invite to the stand at this time. It is my wife, Kristen, who, as an adult, was single for about 35 years before we married. I am asking her to come up and tell us what is in her heart.

**Sister Kristen Oaks:** Thank you, Elder Oaks. I was married in my middle 50s, and I feel like I'm becoming the poster girl for "old."

Before I start, I feel to tell you how much you are loved by your Heavenly Father. We are in Oakland, and I've just been to the visitors' center across the way with President Robert Bauman of the mission. We saw the Christus and the message of the living Christ, and it went into my heart. This is your time. Make it count by dedicating your time to your Heavenly Father.

I love what President Packer says about the Atonement. The Atonement is not something that happens at the end of our lives. It is something that happens every day of our lives. And so I say to our single sisters, make it count.

It can be very painful to be single for such a long time, especially in a church of families. I know how it feels. On my 50th birthday my brother-in-law was reading the newspaper. He said, "Hey, it says here in the paper that at age 50 your chances for getting killed by terrorists are better than your chances for getting married." I knew that dating was tough when he said that, but don't give up. It isn't a terrorist activity.

I would also say to you, be balanced. As a single woman, I had to go forward. I got a doctorate and became so involved in my profession that I forgot about being a good person. I would say to everyone in this room, always remember that your first calling is as a mother or as a father. Develop those domestic talents, talents of love and talents of service. As a single, I had to go searching for service projects, and now I have one every night across the table. I'm so thankful for that.

In closing, I think about the painful times in our lives. They will happen whether you are single or whether you are married. You may have a child that is very ill or the death of someone close to you or a period of life that is very lonely. You might lose a child or have a situation you have no control over, such as a lingering disease. I would ask you to consecrate that to Heavenly Father. In Helaman 3:35 we read that if we yield our hearts unto God, all our actions serve to sanctify us, and so any time becomes a blessed time.

You are my favorite group in the world. You are most dear to me because I know what it feels like to be in your shoes, and I was in them for a very long, long time.

I want you to know that this is the Church of the living God, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is His Church. I'm so thankful that we have a living prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley. And, most of all, I know that we have a Heavenly Father who loves us, as He was my best friend when there was no one else to love me. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

**Elder Dallin H. Oaks:** Thank you, Kristen. Now, brothers and sisters, if you are troubled about something we have just said, please listen very carefully to what I will say now. Perhaps you are a young man feeling pressured by what I have said about the need to start a pattern of dating that can lead to marriage, or a young woman troubled by what we have said about needing to get on with your life.

If you feel you are a special case, so that the strong counsel I have given doesn't apply to you, please don't write me a letter. Why would I make this request? I have learned that the kind of direct counsel I have given results in a large number of letters from members who feel they are an exception, and they want me to confirm that the things I have said just don't apply to them in their special circumstance.

I will explain why I can't offer much comfort in response to that kind of letter by telling you an experience I had

with another person who was troubled by a general rule. I gave a talk in which I mentioned the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13). Afterward a man came up to me in tears saying that what I had said showed there was no hope for him. “What do you mean?” I asked him.

He explained that he had been a machine gunner during the Korean War. During a frontal assault his machine gun mowed down scores of enemy infantry. Their bodies were piled so high in front of his gun that he and his men had to push them away in order to maintain their field of fire. He had killed a hundred, he said, and now he must be going to hell because I had spoken of the Lord’s commandment “Thou shalt not kill.”

The explanation I gave that man is the same explanation I give to you if you feel you are an exception to what I have said. As a General Authority, it is my responsibility to preach general principles. When I do, I don’t try to define all the exceptions. There are exceptions to some rules. For example, we believe the commandment is not violated by killing pursuant to a lawful order in an armed conflict. But don’t ask me to give an opinion on your exception. I only teach the general rules. Whether an exception applies to you is your responsibility. You must work that out individually between you and the Lord.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught this same thing in another way. When he was asked how he governed

such a diverse group of Saints, he said, “I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves” (in John Taylor, “The Organization of the Church,” *Millennial Star*, Nov. 15, 1851, 339). In what I have just said, I am simply teaching correct principles and inviting each one of you to act upon these principles by governing yourself.

Brothers and sisters, it has been a thrill to be with you. I pray that the things that have been said this evening will be carried into your hearts and understood by the power of the Holy Ghost with the same intent that they have been uttered, which is to bless your lives, to give comfort to the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.

This is the Church of Jesus Christ. He suffered and He died in the terrible agonies of Gethsemane and Calvary in order to give us the assurance of immortality and the opportunity for eternal life. I pray that the Lord will bless each of us as we seek to keep the commandments of the Lord, to set our sights ever higher, to accomplish in our day-to-day decisions what I’ve called the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime. This is the Church of Jesus Christ, restored in these latter days, with the power of the priesthood and the fulness of His gospel. Of that I bear witness, as I ask the blessings of the Lord upon you, my noble friends, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.